

## C2 Community Perspectives

A series of forums to elicit community feedback and perspectives on the preliminary recommendations of the Task Force were held between October 2008 and May 2009 (see figure below).

The following summaries reflect community input across the community forums in reference to each of the task force recommendations. The recommendations that elicited the most responses were Multiple Pathways, Educator Performance Management System, Expanded Learning Time, and Cross-System Collaborations. The recommendations for statewide Pre-K, K–3 Literacy, and an Innovation Zone received fewer comments; those brief comments are also reflected in this summary.

There were numerous responses from the forums that referred to issues that the community would like the Task Force to pay attention to that are not related to the preliminary recommendations. These are summarized in the section “Other Perspectives” below.

## Comments on the Task Force Recommendations

### Educator Performance Management System

Comments regarding this recommendation revolved around issues regarding teachers, including teacher performance and evaluation, accountability, and professional development. There was a call for “vested engagement by teachers.” Participants also spoke to the barriers and challenges faced by the urban districts. These included socio-cultural factors such as poverty and diversity, as well as concerns about the physical conditions of schools. A desire for trust on the part of teachers, students, and administrators was expressed.

**Performance and Evaluation** Implement better teacher selection and evaluation with a consistent statewide education performance management system; reward effective teachers and hold all teachers across the system accountable; reward good teachers within the pay structure and consider merit pay and changes in teacher

### UETF Public Engagement Meetings

October 4, 2008	Coming Together to Build Better Schools: Urban Education for the 21st Century	Providence	150 parents, youth, community members and leaders, and civic leaders
November 6, 2008	Community Leaders Meeting	Providence	50 community-based organization leaders
March 28, 2009	Woonsocket Community Forum	Woonsocket	25 parents, youth, and community and civic leaders
April 18, 2009	Latinos Coming Together to Build Better Schools: Urban Education for the 21st Century	Providence	60 Latino and other parents, youth, community members and leaders, and civic leaders
May 13, 2009	Newport Community Forum	Newport	50 parents, youth, and community and civic leaders

contracts; make sure teachers aren't discouraging high expectations; define criteria for measuring teacher performance.

Some teachers work more than others, [doing more than what is required of them] and they get the same salary as teachers that are not as effective. Some teachers have a lack of passion for teaching. They are protected by unions; sometimes they hurt as much as teach students.

**Professional Development** Teachers should meet the skills and needs of current students and show a willingness to adapt; there should be diversity training for teachers and staff and incentives for teacher professional development around language instruction (vouchers); a systemwide teacher mentoring network should be set up to help implement new curriculum.

### Multiple Pathways

Participants responded positively to this recommendation. A desire was expressed for students to have school-to-world connections outside of the typical school structure. Multiple Pathways were also viewed as a way to address discipline issues and dropout rates. Reform around Multiple Pathways should be student-centered and all avenues of opportunity should be open to all students.

**School-to-world connections for students** There need to be pathways and opportunities to connect school work with the outer world of jobs, college, and skills, including opportunities other than college bound programs and expanded career pathways to adult learning and higher education.

**Discipline and students at risk** Provide alternative programs for the chronically disruptive, with less focus on suspension as discipline, more programs for over-age/under-credited students, and a recognition of different learning types of students to avoid mislabeling; pay more attention to students' opinions and make use of peer intervention.

### Cross-System Collaborations

Participants responded that communication and cooperation are essential for Cross-System Collaborations. Collaborations must be "systemic and multi-level" in order to "move beyond programmatic changes."

**Cooperation** Find commonalities among successful schools, increase cooperation between school and the state and interagency collaboration, and increase school-to-business and community partnerships. "We are not maximizing the resources that business can provide."

Address barriers to cross-system collaborations such as the disconnect between schools and the district, territorial politics and school boards, and lack of data collection tools and technology in the classrooms.

**Communication** An integrated plan is needed to increase communication and information exchange in schools and among the all urban communities.

Another perspective from Adam Urbanski, keynote speaker at the Educators' Forum: "We need to do better, particularly now with globalization and technology. No single constituency can do it alone. Collaboration is a prerequisite for change, a precondition. Collaboration means working together for the same common denominator."

### Expanded Learning Time

Responses to this recommendation refer to the quality of ELT activities and suggestions for those activities. Forum participants noted that there are currently too few after-school programs. It was also mentioned that community-based organizations are "doing good after-school work" and connections can be made between schools and CBOs. Questions arose

about whether or not ELT would be mandatory and part of graduation requirements, and whether or not teachers would be paid overtime.

**Goals of ELT** Define the premise and implications of the extended day. Students need quality education, not just to be kept in school longer.

**Activities** Involve internships, pay older students to tutor younger kids, include arts, music, dance, theater, and electives.

### K–3 Literacy Instruction

Participants expressed concerns about student readiness to learn. There was recognition of barriers to early literacy, including second-language barriers, social and home issues, and school absences. It was suggested that “early literacy and numeracy need to be tied together.”

### Pre-K

Participants responded that pre-K should be a priority within the Task Force and that it should be statewide and mandatory.

### Innovation Zone

Participants responded positively to this recommendation. Suggestions included creating a clearing house for sharing ideas and best practices and creating the capacity for innovations and leadership at the building level.

### Other Perspectives

There was a wide range of comments from participants that did not specifically relate to the recommendations of the Task Force. The themes of parent and community engagement, school climate, trust, and communication were prevalent across all of the forums. In addition, the question of funding and resources was consistently raised. There was also a set of comments referring to systemic issues at the district level around curriculum and graduation requirements.

### Parent and Community Engagement and Involvement

Participants in the community forums mentioned parent engagement and involvement as a top issue for them in the schools. This was one of the themes that emerged most consistently across the forums. Specifically, there were calls for “cultivating strong parent involvement” in the schools for better student outcomes. A desire was expressed for principals to be “flexible and open to interact with parents and teachers and students.” There was mention of “cultivating a welcoming and engaging culture for parents.” One participant shared a vision where “parents are called regularly with student updates and the timing of parent conferences works for all parents. Schools are welcoming and language accessible. Parents can easily volunteer in schools.” Another suggested that “principals be evaluated on parental engagement and that there are consequences.”

**Communication** Better communication is needed between the community and the school.” Provide more information to parents about what they can do to contribute. “Parents should be viewed as stakeholders in a company and be briefed throughout the year by school and district staff. Meetings should be staggered to allow parents with tight schedules attendance options.” Create ways for teachers to reach out to parents.

**Student-parent connection** If the students are going to be involved, the parents should also be engaged. Regular parent conferences should be available and schools should try to provide a more welcoming and hospitable environment, in which parents are comfortable. Parents should motivate their children to do better.

Children were treated better when parents were involved. “The school should offer its facilities to parents and families when school is not in session.”

### Training and Empowerment for Families

Participants also said it was important to create “pathways for parents to become part of the fabric of their children’s education.” One participant remarked that “we need systems to improve parent and family engagement.” The need was expressed for empowering parents to engage at the school level so that parents can reinforce what is happening in schools and vice versa, and more support and training for parents to support their kids and help them engage with schools.

### Communication and Trust

Participants identified a need for greater communication between schools, principals, teachers, parents, and the community. They also called for communication to be more consistent and in the proper language of the parents. A request was made to “make sure mailings home from school are in the correct language.” There were also calls for activities that allow parents and teachers to interact and provide access to teacher and high school leaders, as well as greater accessibility to principals for parents. Suggestions included regular emails, phone calls, and even door-to-door organizing of parents and home visits.

**Ongoing conversation** Convene an honest conversation; keep having conversations like these forums.

**Trust** Set a table of trust: “When we get together to know who is there to help and who has a resource to provide, we can create trust.” Hold trust-building workshops.

**Respectful communication** “Engage parents based on their cultural and language competencies”; address language barriers in communication. “Parents need centers, places and interpreters, so they can learn about the school system, and the forms they need to fill out.” “At schools there are not translators for Spanish-speaking parents, and the ones that do have them . . . the parents feel the translators are talking down to them.”

### State–District Responsibility

There were many issues brought up which have deep systemic roots and cannot be addressed without participation from the state and the district.

**Politics** Several comments argued that politics has come to dominate education policies and must be curbed. There was a call for “good leadership and less politics” and to “focus on the necessities of our students and not pay attention to what our politicians say.”

**More equitable funding and resource allocation** “Address inequalities both within urban districts and between suburban schools.” Highest need should have the most funding. Equitable statewide educational funding formula is needed with better allocation of resources. More money is needed. “Funding fuels all!” Students need more financial support: “Equal access to SATs in terms of cost”; “the college financial support system is not well known.”

**Equity** High standards, equal access, and equal engagement for all. Equalize race, class, and social differences; equal rights for special needs kids.

**Diversity** Increase number of minority teachers and administrators in schools through state or district policy: “hire within urban” and “diversify teachers to reflect the community.” Invest in urban educators, have minority representation.

## Curriculum and Standards

Participants agreed that schools need to raise the bar and move to a curriculum that is more challenging, both in breadth and depth, and to ensure that the curriculum is taught in challenging and hands-on ways that are relevant to young people's lives and future careers.

## School Climate and Culture

Comments addressed changing the school culture to be more welcoming for students and making the schools a positive learning environment that would "celebrate success" and "believe in our kids." Suggestions include: "make children feel valued," "changing apathetic culture," and "create a student-first culture."

**Violence** "Increase true safety in school and between students outside of school."

**Respect** A need for people to understand and respect the culture of the schools. "Culture is academic and social and can include community, parents youth, CBOs and youth workers, school classroom, district, teachers."

**Student-first culture** Promote and foster student and youth voice.

**Accountability** Create a culture of accountability. A "lack of 'It takes a village' mentality" was cited.

## Relationships with Adults

There were several comments on the issue of current relationships between teachers and students. Many dealt with creating trust and honesty. Others pointed out that teachers need to discuss with the students the "why" of schooling: "talk to our children about what they need and how they view school." The most resounding theme was to have a secure channel of communication between the two constituencies.

Each student needs an adult they can trust and have positive contact with, caring adults with positive attitudes and higher expectations, and good communication between adults and students.

## Summary of Other Perspectives

Top issues mentioned were funding and parent engagement. There were many references to school culture, trust, communication, and meaningful relationships between students and adults. There was also significant mention of issues around equity and diversity.

Overall, a desire for action was expressed: "More action and less talk!" Finally, participants in the forums wondered, "What are the action steps that are going to be taken? What's the follow-up and how?"

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