

EVALUATION BRIEF

Public Engagement Family-Schools-Community Partnership Initiative

What Can We Do To Close Achievement Gaps and Make Sure That All Students Learn?

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Background Information

The National Education Association (NEA) launched a Public Engagement Partnership (PEP) in 1997. The primary goal at the time was to provide state and local affiliates with resources to organize community dialogues focused on improving public schools. In the past five years, this Community Conversation Model has been expanded to move from a single conversation to follow-up action by the community. The expanded model is referred to as ***Closing Achievement Gaps through Community Conversations That Lead to Collective Action***.

The Lincoln Education Association (LEA) received a Public Partnership Grant from NEA in 2009. Work on this grant is being led by the LEA president, an administrator from Lincoln Public Schools (LPS), and a community representative, director of one of the cultural centers in Lincoln. These three leaders form the PEP Leadership Team.

Local Context

It is important for the reader to know that a parallel (but different) initiative was taking place during the same school year (2009-2010). Two Community Conversation meetings were held in Lincoln during fall 2009. The public was invited to attend the two-meeting conversation, sponsored by the Lincoln Board of Education, in partnership with the Lincoln-Lancaster County Chapter of the United Way and the Foundation for Lincoln Public Schools. About 160 community members attended the first meeting (October 15th) and about 200 people attended the second meeting (November 5th). A summary of recommendations, based on this Community Conversation, was presented to the Board of Education in April 2010. Responsibility for follow-up activities has been assigned to the Lincoln Community Learning Centers (CLCs) and the United Way.

While the Fall 2009 meetings (sponsored by LPS, United Way, and Foundation for LPS) and the Spring/Summer 2010 meetings (sponsored by PEP) were both called "Community Conversations," the focus of the two initiatives differed in important ways. The purpose of the fall Community Conversation was to address issues that impact ***students who do not graduate from high school*** and to begin to identify solutions. The purpose of the spring/summer Community Conversation was to engage a variety of community stakeholders to address the question, ***"What can we do to close achievement gaps and make sure that all students learn?"*** While these two topics are related, the content of the two

Conversations differed. This Evaluation Brief summarizes the PEP Community Conversation and offers an analysis of the content of the conversation.

The Public Engagement Family-Schools-Community Partnership Initiative

Early in the year, the PEP Leadership Team began forming the Public Engagement Partnership (PEP). In April, PEP introduced the initiative to Lincoln by hosting a Dinner and Dialogue for selected community, family, and school representatives. Also in April, the PEP Leadership Team attended the NEA training for grantees. The PEP Advisory Committee (which includes representatives from the CLCs and the United Way) was formed. NEA trained 25 people as facilitators and recorders for the Community Conversation.

The first PEP Family, School, Community Conversation was held at Lincoln High School on May 8, 2010. NEA public engagement materials were used. The meeting started with an introduction to achievement gaps and potential approaches for closing the gaps. The content of a PowerPoint presentation included a definition of achievement gaps, how gaps are measured, and identified which groups are compared and where gaps in achievement exist. The presentation also showed some local data (drop out and graduation rates) and national data (NAEP achievement in reading and math), disaggregated by designated groups. Three potential approaches to closing achievement gaps (school accountability, school resources, and family & community engagement at an early age) were introduced. The content of a Participant Guide provided further information on achievement gaps and the three approaches.

The remainder of the meeting was devoted to small group discussions. There was a facilitator and recorder assigned to each small group. The discussions lasted approximately two hours. The first question addressed was "Which of these three approaches makes the most sense to you?" As the discussion in each group progressed, recorders summarized comments made by group members. The comments were listed in these categories: Common Ground, Areas of Disagreement, Questions and Concerns, Action Ideas, and Next Steps.

The PEP Advisory Committee met to review results of the first meeting. While members reviewed data collected in small groups, they did *not* conduct a formal analysis of the content. The Director of the Malone Center held a meeting with directors from all cultural centers in Lincoln to discuss the findings. The PEP Leadership Team decided to hold a second PEP Community Conversation with parents and leaders from Lincoln's Cultural Centers. This second Community Conversation was held at the Malone Center on July 29, 2010. The meeting format was the same as the first PEP Community Conversation.

There are four steps in the PEP Scope of Work, as follows: (1) conduct Community Conversation meetings; (2) analyze findings from Community Conversation meetings, identify the most critical issues related to closing achievement gaps, and organize a follow-up collective community action planning session that will focus on these issues; (3) reconvene participants to present findings on the top critical issues; (4) NEA staff conduct Advocate Training and Community Mobilization session.

In Lincoln, Step 1 (Community Conversation) has been completed. The PEP Leadership Team and Advisory Committee are working on Step 2 at the present time. After reviewing information provided on feedback sheets (written notes taken during each small group discussion), the Leadership Team decided to hire an independent evaluation specialist to analyze content. The evaluation specialist selected for the work (this writer) did *not* participate in Step 1. In October, the LEA president provided

the evaluation specialist with background information, a thorough explanation of the process used for the Community Conversation, and written materials describing what took place during the sessions.

Methodology

Following a review of materials provided, the evaluation specialist conducted a Content Analysis of written notes taken during small group discussions, held at the PEP Community Conversation meetings. The notes, taken by trained recorders, were typed at the LEA office. There is a separate document for each meeting (May 8th and July 29th). The typed comments are divided into five sections; Common Ground, Areas of Disagreement, Questions and Concerns, Action Ideas, and Next Steps.

Procedurally, the Content Analysis involved several steps. The basic task was to read all comments in a section, to create comment categories, and then to place as many comments as possible in one or more created categories. The purpose of placing comments into categories is to discover underlying themes emanating from discussions. The evaluation specialist repeated this process 10 times, one time for each section (such as Common Ground or Action Ideas) and each meeting. Next, she examined all the data, looking for commonalities across categories and underlying themes. The final step was to summarize the findings and draw conclusions.

Limitations of the Content Analysis

It is important for the reader to know limitations of this type of analysis. First, and perhaps most critical, is that the evaluation specialist was working from written documents alone. She was *not* present at the PEP Community Conversation meetings. While this situation assures a fair degree of objectivity, much is lost. The reporter (this writer) did *not* observe facial expressions, body language, and the intensity of comments made by participants. Words alone are being analyzed; non-verbal expressions, which often reflect feelings, are not included.

A second limitation is in “the notes” themselves. There are few complete sentences included in the notes; in some cases the evaluation specialist was unable to understand the comment (and therefore could not include it in the analysis). Taking accurate notes during a group discussion is challenging. The notes *may not* represent ideas and opinions from all members of the group. For example, in some groups one or two participants monopolize the discussion. The articulate, persuasive, and/or passionate speaker often gets more time.

Another limitation is that (to date) only one person has conducted a systematic analysis of the content of discussions during the Community Conversation. In qualitative analysis, typically two or more readers evaluate content and then check for consistency across readers. Discrepancies in interpretation can then be resolved.

Despite limitations described above, the summary of findings (below) will be useful in identifying the most critical issues in Lincoln related to closing achievement gaps. The PEP Leadership Team and Advisory Committee will discuss findings and conclusions, presented by the evaluation specialist, and

compare them with their perceptions and understandings of the PEP Community Conversation. That activity will result in a list of key issues.

FINDINGS BASED on the CONTENT ANALYSIS

Approximately 80 people attended the Community Conversation meeting, held at Lincoln High School in May. More than 65 community members attended the Community Conversation meeting, held at the Malone Center in July. The number of participants at the second meeting included some families and some limited English-speaking people. Despite an observation by the LEA president that each of the meetings attracted a somewhat different group of stakeholders, the evaluation specialist noted a good deal of consistency in content across the two discussions. This is *not* surprising inasmuch as the same introduction (PowerPoint presentation and handout), the same questions, and the same structures were used for both meetings.

The evaluation specialist also found consistency across sections of the notes (such as Common Ground and Action Ideas). Consequently, the summarized findings (below) represent findings from the whole Community Conversation. Three major topics are listed in the next section. They are presented in no particular order, as all of them received considerable attention (number of times listed in the notes) during small group discussions.

Major Topics

School Climate and Conditions

Numerous topics were discussed that participants believe contribute to achievement gaps. These topics represent perceptions among participants of current conditions in schools which need to be improved.

- Communication between families and the schools
- Family involvement in schools
- Relationship building – school staffs with students of color and their families
- Professional development related to cultural education and understanding
- Higher expectations for students of color
- Additional people of color hired for LPS staff positions
- Resources for non-English speaking students and families
- Assessment/testing practices; interpretation of test results
- Parent/teacher conferences; homework policies and practices
- Too much stress on school staff, particularly teachers; need to reduce class size

Resources Needed to Address Achievement Gaps

The *need* for additional resources and the *use* of existing resources to address achievement gaps permeated small group discussions. Insufficient resources were identified as a barrier to closing the gaps. Concerns were expressed about perceived *inequity* of resources across all schools in LPS and students' homes. When specific resources were identified, technology was cited as an example of inequitable access to resources. *Not all families have computers and phones.*

Need to Engage the Broader Community

The content analysis showed an understanding on the part of participants that schools *cannot* be solely responsible for implementing strategies designed to close achievement gaps. What happens in homes and communities contributes to the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development of children and youth.

Participants talked about schools working directly with “partners” from cultural centers, community agencies, businesses, and government. Many comments in this category were general; they did *not* specify how to accomplish the goal of engaging the wider community. *Invite community into schools. Find ways to engage broader community (give reasons for people to engage). Engage all stakeholders.*

Issues Raised During Discussions

Numerous issues were raised during Community Conversation discussions. Typically, issues were introduced as unresolved questions or concerns participants have. In some cases, issues were brought up in only one discussion group. Issues identified during discussions are listed below.

Issues Related to Accountability

Some participants questioned the meaning of “accountability” and structure of the discussion related to “school accountability” as a potential strategy for closing achievement gaps. *This should not be an either/or approach; all are important. There is disagreement about how school accountability should be defined. The accountability process is broken. Accountability is needed at all levels. Efforts do not match results.*

Issues Related to Achievement Gaps

This discussion focused on specific topics such as the “meaning” of achievement gaps and the need for local (in addition to national) data. Controversial topics related to strategies for addressing achievement gaps were mentioned. Examples of such topics are achievement (the end) vs. learning (the process) and remediation vs. intervention. Numerous questions were raised. *How innovative does LPS really want to be? Do we really want to close achievement gaps? Is the gap an asset (for example, in applying for federal grants)? If we closed the gap, what's next?*

Other Issues

Equality across all ethnic groups is needed. When are the schools going to acknowledge that American Indians exist? How do we “sell” the work of Cultural Centers without promoting segregation? Who is achieving in specific ethnic groups (what is working for these students)?

Action Ideas and Next Steps

A number of suggestions for action (either implied or stated directly) were made during discussions. Some of the actions proposed are specific and could be incorporated into an Action Plan. Others are very general; participants did *not* say how to implement recommendations. The first three general suggestions (listed below) are parallel to the major topics identified. They were discussed in a previous section of this report.

1. Improve school climate for all.
2. Address the need for additional resources and inequity of resources.
3. Engage the wider community.
4. Identify what is working.

Participants talked about the need to use research and evaluation studies to determine the best strategies for closing achievement gaps. Suggestions are listed below.

Study successful models.

Determine what is working elsewhere (throughout the country).

Implement “proven” strategies.

Raise local questions. For example, LPS built and opened a number of new school buildings. Did that investment of resources have an impact on achievement gaps in Lincoln?

5. Consider non-traditional approaches.

In this discussion, participants said that “business as usual” is *not* working. Achievement gaps are *not* being reduced sufficiently and/or quickly enough. Suggestions are listed below.

Identify and find ways to move children through transitional “gates” so their choices lead them toward success.

Hold “non-traditional” interactions.

Adopt a different school year model to address the summer brain drain.

Adopt a different school schedule (not just 8:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.).

Use a voucher system.

When parents are unable or unwilling to engage, provide incentives for their student to achieve.

Vary school formats based on needs of students.

Establish a Multicultural Focus School.

6. Ask students.

Students are very important stakeholders. Adults need to make sure the “student voice” is heard. Older students could be asked similar questions to those being addressed in the Community Conversation discussions. Students should be part of the solution.

7. Work with the LPS Board of Education.

Several comments indicated that the LPS Board of Education needs to be more directly involved in addressing achievement gaps and potential solutions to these gaps. They are listed below.

The Board needs to hear directly from representatives of ethnic groups.

Let the Board hear this information; let people be heard by decision makers.

The LPS Board should have a subcommittee on ethnicity.

8. Work with cultural centers.

9. Work with politicians.

10. Expand literacy programs.

Participants discussed the need for improved literacy for students and parents alike.

11. Use peer-to-peer interventions.

The discussion included student-to-student and family-to-family interventions.

12. Meet needs of students.

13. Stop Talking and Do Something.

14. Conduct a community survey.

15. Encourage non-parent volunteers in the schools.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS and NEXT STEPS

In summary, the Public Engagement Partnership planned and conducted two Community Conversation meetings. Each session started with a presentation that addressed achievement gaps and potential strategies for closing achievement gaps. Following the presentations, community members participated in small-group discussions. Each group had a trained monitor and a trained recorder. During the guided discussions, participants shared their perceptions of present conditions in schools and the community; they raised issues important to them and made suggestions for actions that should be taken to reduce the existing achievement gaps.

Findings from a Content Analysis of notes taken during small group discussions show that topics fell into three major categories; school climate and conditions, resources needed to address achievement gaps, and the need to engage the broader community in working to reduce these gaps. Participants identified current conditions in schools that need to be improved. The discussion about resources included the need for additional resources as well as perceived inequities in the distribution of resources. Finally, a common thread throughout discussions was that schools cannot solve problems (including achievement gaps) in isolation. Partners from cultural centers, community agencies, businesses, and government in Lincoln must collaborate with schools in addressing achievement gaps.

The next step in the PEP Scope of Work is to identify the *most critical issues* related to closing achievement gaps for groups of students in Lincoln Public Schools. The PEP Leadership Team and the PEP Advisory Committee need to reach consensus on the most critical issues. The following step will be to organize a community action planning session to focus on these issues.

The major challenge in this Initiative is to take the Community Conversation, conducted by Lincoln's Public Engagement Partnership, and turn it into collective action that leads to closing achievement gaps. While this is an ambitious challenge, the goal is worthy and the work is necessary.