

## West Hartford Public School District

**Agenda Item:** Welcoming Families Through the Lens of Equity

**Meeting Date:** May 16, 2017

**From:** Roszema Haskins, Director of Adult Education and Diversity Advancement  
Kerry Jones, Director of Elementary Education

**Through:** Tom Moore, Superintendent

Family engagement is “everything family members do to support their children’s learning, guide them through a complex school system, advocate for them when problems arise, and collaborate with educators and community groups to achieve more equitable and effective learning opportunities. The terms parent or family are intended to mean a natural, adoptive or foster parent, or other adult serving as a parent, such as a close relative, legal or educational guardian and/or a community or agency advocate. As students become older and more mature, they should and will take increasing responsibility for their learning. Nevertheless, they will need support from the adults in their lives throughout their educational careers.” (Excerpt from **A Definition of School-Family-Community Partnerships** from the CT State Board of Education, <http://www.sde.ct.gov/sde/LIB/sde/pdf/board/SFCP.pdf>)

The Open Choice and Family Engagement subcommittees of the Equity and Diversity Council (EDC) created the following definition of Family Engagement and five related principles to guide district efforts:

**Family Engagement** is the result of a relationship between the family and the school where families and school representatives work in partnership to best improve student achievement and social emotional well-being.

- o Providing a welcoming school environment and reducing identified barriers
- o Positive communication regarding student behavior & achievement to families
- o Represented through an active two-way communication utilizing a variety of mediums
- o Communication that allows for the identification of experiences that increase dialogue opportunities
- o Opportunities for families to be involved and influence planning/policy utilizing their expertise  
*(EDC Open Choice subcommittee, 2/2017)*

This report is organized around these five principles of family engagement as defined by the EDC Family Engagement Subcommittee.

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## ❖ Welcoming school environment and reduction of identified barriers

### ***Current efforts***

Engagement of families begins when families register their children to attend the West Hartford Public Schools or visit a school. Families are provided information necessary to register their child for school. Registration requirements are also located on the WHPS website or provided when a family contacts the office. In addition to age and resident verification, families may inquire about immunization/health and nutrition services. The Residency Office is equipped with nurse supervisor contact information and health and nutrition services forms for families. Once the registration process is complete and everything has been verified, the family is provided the school contact information, a current school calendar and health forms. In addition, the Residency Office staff notify Pupil Services, if a child has an IEP, to aid in expediting the PPT process. Staff speaks English, Spanish and some Portuguese.

When students and their families walk into the schools or contact school offices upon entry into the district and each day thereafter, both the physical environment and greetings they receive should reflect family engagement principles of respect, cultural competence, and reciprocity. The EDC Family Engagement Subcommittee has created a draft *School and Town Resource Guide* which will be translated into at least four languages this summer, ready for distribution to new families through the Residency Office and school offices as well as Kindergarten and Pre-Kindergarten transition events next year. This year, several office paraprofessionals joined a professional learning session on cultural competence offered by the Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment and Director for Diversity Advancement. School climate surveys are conducted with all staff and families as well as students in grades five-twelve each spring. The data from those surveys informs annual school-based improvement strategies related to school climate. Two English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) family outreach coordinators, newly hired this year through grant-funded support, have made connections with local/community resources and shared information with families in need. The PreK-12 ESOL curriculum specialist is currently coordinating translation of “first day of school” information packets which include district-wide information/flyers.

### ***Identified needs/Areas of growth***

Future needs to support this family engagement principle, particularly in identifying and reducing identified barriers to family engagement, include the following:

- Communicating and promoting discussion around the EDC’s five principles of family engagement with all school/district staff and stakeholder groups, including students and families (What evidence do we have of the family engagement principles in practice? What are our current assets/strengths? What are our needs for additional data or changes in practice to achieve those principles?)
- Training for all staff, including secretaries, custodians, cafeteria staff, and residency office, in cultural competence, replicating the professional learning efforts in this area for certified staff this year
- Ongoing review and audits of school environments and communication processes (e.g., district and school websites, phone greetings, emails/newsletters). Consider utilizing CT Welcoming Schools Walkthrough tools/resources
- Ready access to translation services to support registration process

- Identifying and recognizing effective strategies to ensure welcoming school environments across all schools
- ESOL Family Liaison supporting the Residency Office during peak registration periods (e.g., August, spring Pre-K/Kindergarten registration)

❖ **Positive communication regarding student behavior & achievement to families**

“One-way communication, typically school to home, is necessary to handle school and class logistics....If parents know what is happening at school before it happens, they are in a position to help their child prepare and look forward to school activities.” (Fiske, M.A. “Family Engagement: It’s a Piece of Cake.” Retrieved from <http://www.wafamilyengagement.org/>)

***Current efforts***

Families learn about district-wide and school-based information through websites and regular school newsletters which include information on topics such as transition process (Kindergarten, middle school, and high school), elementary magnet school lottery, and state and local testing schedules as well as school-based events. Curriculum nights at all levels and open house events at the elementary level provide an overview of academic and behavioral expectations and opportunities for clarification/dialogue with teachers and administrators. *Curriculum in a Nutshell* documents at the elementary level outline learning standards in all academic areas as well as arts and physical education. Family letters are shared with parents at the beginning of new units of instruction in math and literacy. Elementary students receive written progress reports indicating progress in both academic and social-emotional/personal development. High school courses of study catalogues are accessible electronically. Middle and high school report cards as well as course grades throughout each marking period are posted through PowerSchool.

Each school utilizes school survey data from teachers, parents, and students to develop annual goals outlining efforts to support Board of Education goals related to school climate for students and families. School plans are posted to the website and shared through PTO and/or other parent leadership/advisory structures. Classroom teachers utilize a variety of tools to communicate with families (phone calls, Twitter and Seesaw, shared Google sites) to share and celebrate student learning and effort. Middle school team celebrations and high school recognition events highlight positive student behavior and achievement.

***Identified needs/Areas of Growth***

- Development of a systemic approach to identify and share across all schools and levels the strategies and tools educators are using to recognize and celebrate student citizenship and achievement
- Determining how to best promote and measure the effectiveness of these communication efforts in enhancing student and family engagement

❖ **Active two-way communication through a variety of mediums**

***Current efforts***

Translation services are offered and provided to parents (including those who are enrolled in the mandated Adult Education English as a Second Language classes) for parent-teacher conferences, Planning and Placement Team, Section 504 and School Support Team meetings, as well as for other school activities. We have observed an increased number of requests for translation services for families. During 2016-2017 school year, translation

requests were 50% higher than in 2015-2016 school year. Given the relatively consistent numbers of students identified for ESOL services over the past two years, the increase in translation requests exemplifies increased efforts to improve communication with all families.

The Transition to Kindergarten process has been refined in collaboration with our Great by 8 community partners. We have streamlined information into an informative “Guide to Transitioning to Kindergarten” booklet. These booklets are provided for all entering kindergarten families and are available in both English and Spanish. The transition process at each elementary school includes an evening orientation session for parents/guardians and a visitation day for students and their parents/guardians. Opportunities for two-way communication are important features of these school-based transition days. Kindergarten visitation days are scheduled for small groups of Eight to twelve students. While students visit classrooms, families have opportunity to finalize registration with Residency Office staff, meet each other, ask questions of school staff and current parents, and share information about their child’s strengths, interests, and needs.

The middle and high schools offer transition ‘Open House’ events and information sessions for families with students entering grades six and nine. Families are also invited to attend a special joint Middle School Transition Night event offered on multiple evenings and at multiple sites to become familiar with West Hartford’s overall middle school program; to learn about a variety of unique and exciting opportunities that await students in grade six, and to help families navigate the transition. Similarly, the secondary schools work together to plan for transition activities for families with children moving from the middle school to the high school. Additionally, the Pupil Services staff works in collaboration with the Special Education Parent Teacher Organization (SEPTO) to coordinate an annual ‘Transition Planning Night’ for families whose children will transition to Preschool, Kindergarten, middle school, high school and postsecondary. PTO members are represented and participate in open house events and information sessions as a welcoming way to connect families with families.

WHPS recognizes the uniqueness of every family and aims to help every child realize their potential. Invitations to families to provide input to the class placement process and to help teachers to access or find every child’s ‘spark’ is extended families at start of the school year. At the elementary level, teachers use interest surveys and conference questionnaires to collect parent input. Middle schools utilize similar tools through grade level teams. The high schools utilize the ‘Brag Sheet’ as part of the Naviance program for college/career goal-setting. Throughout the school year, parents are welcomed to contact teachers and administrators as frequently as necessary to give input or ask questions. All schools and district offices maintain current staff directories.

### ***Identified needs/areas of growth***

- Identify best practices regarding use of two-way communication strategies, including surveys and social media, to both share information and receive feedback from families
- Systemic approaches to seeking parent input on what they need prior to planning transition events. Example: ESOL family liaison met with parents and survey of ESOL parents who attended a recent evening event supported development of new ways to support/engage with their children’s school.
- Additional input and involvement of parents who have recently been through transition process (entering Pre-K/K, grade five-six and grades eight-nine) as part of the planning process with school district leaders and to support new families

## ❖ **Communication that allows for the identification of experiences that increase dialogue opportunities**

### ***Current efforts***

District work toward communication systems that foster home-school dialogue is the cornerstone of the EDC Family Engagement Subcommittee's attention this year. Staff representation on school-based Parent Teacher Organizations (PTO) and the Parent Teacher Council (PTC), coupled with EDC presentations during PTO and PTC meetings provide opportunities for information-sharing and dialogue on critical district areas of focus and parent/guardian interest (e.g., mathematics teaching and learning, LGBTQ advisory efforts). School-based PTOs collaborate with building leadership to identify needs and support opportunities for student and family engagement within and beyond the school day (e.g., school fairs, science and art celebrations). At the elementary level, the number of family literacy and math nights as well as family celebrations/international nights has significantly increased over the past five years. These events have engaged families in presentations and activities/games to foster student-student, student-family, and family-family dialogue about their family culture and traditions as well as core academic learning areas.

Parent-teacher conferences are held in November and March at the elementary, middle and high school levels at day and early evening times, and through face-to-face, phone and video conferencing (e.g. Skype, FaceTime). One example of strategic school-home communication and relationship-building efforts is the recent staff-organized elementary Parent-Teacher Conferences held at the Hillcrest Avenue Neighborhood Outreach Center (HANOC) in the fall, in collaboration with the West Hartford Department of Social Services. Parent and staff engagement inspired a subsequent parent gathering at HANOC where parents and WHPS educators engaged in rich conversation facilitated by a Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) specialist. Further, the high schools offer resources to assist families in developing postsecondary plans for students by coordinating events for parents of students exploring postsecondary education, career, military or gap year options.

Efforts to increase dialogue opportunities for ESOL students and families include fall ESOL information nights, a new summer resource fair providing access to information and representatives from local organizations that support students and families during the summer (e.g., Leisure Services, YMCA, Children's Museum, and West Hartford Adult Education). Dialogue opportunities were also provided at a first-time ESOL ice skating event held in April, 2017. The ESOL curriculum specialist has collaborated with Faxon Library to organize and promote a summer reading program and related event for families in the Faxon Library area. All of these efforts with families have been supported through Immigrant Grant funding.

### ***Identified needs/areas of growth***

- Analysis of parent/guardian representation on school and district-based committees (Which schools represented? Diversity of representation?)
- Collection of benchmark family engagement data to enhance the current state-required school climate surveys each spring. Consider additional questions that align with EDC subcommittee's five principles as well as Joyce Epstein's conceptual framework and other research-based, effective models for family engagement. Utilize curriculum nights or fall parent-teacher conferences to gather data to support current year efforts.

## ❖ **Opportunities for families to be involved and influence planning/policy utilizing their expertise**

### ***Current efforts***

The EDC chaired by the Director of Diversity Advancement signaled the WHPS' long-term commitment to developing a systemic approach to enhancing our policies, practices, and the teaching and learning process toward ensuring equitable opportunities and support for each and every student and family. Parent representation on the EDC is critical to these efforts. The EDC invites parent involvement in the Family Engagement and Open Choice Enhancement subcommittees and has seen increased parent participation.

The EDC recognizes and values the diversity among WHPS families. According to the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Welcoming Schools Organization, "Students in the US live in an array of family structures: almost 25% live with extended family members; 1.5 million are adopted; close to 3 million fathers are the primary parent; 25% have at least one parent born in another country; and an estimated 6 million Americans (children and adults) have an LGBT parent." (March, 2017). *Connections*, the district's newsletter and the EDC webpage frequently features articles, information, resources and happenings related to equity, diversity and inclusion within the West Hartford Public Schools. Information for how parents can get involved in the work of the EDC is highlighted.

The EDC accesses the PTO, PTC, SEPTO and other organized parent membership bodies to build, nurture, and sustain relationships with families. These vehicles also serve to access funds of knowledge among our families. A district assessment audit committee engaged parents as part of the process to review the purpose/range of local and state assessments and recommend sustaining or modifying current practices. With parent and teacher input, the five Title I elementary schools develop and annually review their school compacts outlining school, family, and student responsibilities within the school community. Opportunities exist for parents to serve as mentors and volunteers in our schools. Parents also serve on principal search committees and are instrumental in helping the district to build human capital among our leadership team.

### ***Identified needs/Areas of Growth***

- Inviting and identifying expertise and interests of families within schools and across the district. Consider supplementing existing tools with other data collection tools such as the Aspire Survey to determine assets, skills, professions, interests, relationships to engage involvement and support for areas such as college and career planning, curriculum implementation (e.g. STEM-related classes), and 1:1 support through mentoring.

### **Family Engagement: Open Choice**

As a founding district of the Open Choice school integration program, WHPS views our participation as an ethical and moral commitment. WHPS maintains a vision for *Clear Paths. Bright Futures. No Limits.* To this end, WHPS is committed to building capacity for cultural competence in ways that will strengthen safe and comfortable reciprocal relationships with children and families.

### ***Current efforts***

With the assistance of our Family Engagement Consultant, stakeholders are engaged in on-going and in-depth examination and evaluation of our policies, programs, and practices relevant to Open Choice and family engagement. Several strategic efforts and systemic changes that exemplify our commitment to providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for students and families of the Open Choice program are currently in place. When students are selected for a placement within a West Hartford school through the Regional School Choice Office (RSCO) lottery, parents are contacted individually by phone and an appointment to register and receive further instructions is scheduled through the Residency Office. Subsequently, welcoming outreach by building-level administration and staff is initiated families have the opportunity to have their questions answered and receive information about the student's placement, the school and orientation events. Open Choice families who are new to the district are invited to attend an August WHPS/Open Choice Welcome Dinner and Orientation. The event provides families an overview of our schools, beginning school year events and procedures, information about the Town of West Hartford and an opportunity for students, parents, and school staff to interact with each other. The

event concludes with a bus tour of West Hartford with stops at the schools that new students will attend. The bus ride also allows for time to review school bus safety, monitoring, and GPS tracking information with families.

The composition of the Open Choice Enhancement Subcommittee of the EDC includes: WHPS staff, Open Choice parent participants who reside in Hartford, and parents who reside in West Hartford. This year, the subcommittee focused more deeply on family engagement. Subcommittee members, recognized that the unique sacrifices and needs of Open Choice families requires a closer study and intentional efforts to promote a more welcoming environment and an inclusive atmosphere for Open Choice participants. The mission of the Open Choice Enhancement Subcommittee align with WHPS Board goals. The work and actions of the subcommittee are guided by the School Family Engagement Needs Assessment Report (June, 2016). Parents and staff have had the opportunity to share their experiences, concerns, recommendations, and questions regarding Open Choice in West Hartford through parent meetings, phone conversations, and one-to-one meetings. Some of the initial findings from parent sessions resulted in immediate enhancements (e.g. the Open Choice webpage, summer program offerings listed on the Continuing Education website include Hartford leisure and academic programs).

Each year, WHPS participates in an Open Choice Book Club, a professional development experience designed to facilitate discussion about teaching a diverse student population. This year's book title was *New Ways to Engage Parents: Strategies and Tools for Teachers and Leaders, K-12* by Dr. Patricia Edwards. A total of thirty WHPS elementary and secondary educators attended a kick-off event, three book club discussions and a culminating Social Justice Symposium in which the author, Dr. Edwards was keynote. Throughout the year, book club participants worked with the Capitol Region Education Council (CREC) facilitators to build capacity and develop a plan for engaging parents, through the lens of equity.

***Identified needs/areas of growth***

- Structures for creating connections between Hartford families of the Open Choice program and connections between West Hartford and Hartford families
- Providing a forum for parents of the Open Choice program to give input to the planning of Family Connections events
- Outreach to PTOs to assist with invitations to Open Choice parent participants to become engaged in PTO activities