

Opening the Circle: Parental aspirations for Lawrence's schools

*Report prepared by:
Lawrence CommunityWorks for
the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association*



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Executive Summary

In November of 2011, due to low student achievement, high dropout rates and low graduation rates, the MA board of elementary and secondary education declared that the Lawrence Public Schools were “Chronically Underperforming.” In January of 2012 the state appointed a receiver with the power to create sweeping changes and to develop a turnaround plan for the system. The debate over the quality and future of education in the city has been a long one, leaving Lawrence parents concerned about what role they can play in the process.

During the spring and summer of 2012, realizing their mutual desire to understand and advance the educational aspirations of Lawrence parents and students, the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association (MCPSA) approached Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW) with the aim of adapting LCW’s innovative approach for resident engagement, NeighborCircles, in order to convene groups of parents with children in both traditional public schools and charter schools throughout the city of Lawrence and to report on the results of these conversations. The purpose of this new project, dubbed ParentCircles, was 1) to involve parents in the conversation and gain a deeper understanding and insight into their concerns and desires for improving the educational achievement of their children and 2) to inform community leaders and policy makers about parental aspirations for education reform in Lawrence.

Twelve ParentCircles—24 meetings—were completed during the summer and fall with 131 Lawrence parents participating. All of the Circle meetings were held in Spanish with English interpretation when necessary. Participants displayed an eagerness and willingness to share their experiences and impressions of Lawrence schools and required little prompting to get the conversations rolling.

The ParentCircles provided Lawrence parents with an opportunity to connect with other parents in the community and discuss issues close to the heart, the education of their children. It was obvious to us that parents were eager to have conversations about the quality of education in the city, but also to see changes and improvements in the system. Although the conversations touched on many topics, there was a consensus that emerged around four key findings:

Strengthening relationships between Lawrence parents and teachers: Parents expressed a disconnect between the teachers and the community and wanted to see more opportunities to build relationships and gain a deeper understanding of each other’s experiences and expectations that are brought to the classroom.

Learning from successful practices of Lawrence Charter Schools in engaging parents and promoting educational excellence: There is a perception within the city of Lawrence that the charter schools have higher parent participation. There are varying opinions as to why this is—parents are strongly encourage to participate, teachers and administrators dedicate more time to reach out to parents—but a consensus that they are doing something right when it comes to getting parents in the door. Many parents also believe the charters offer a more rigorous curriculum better preparing students for college.

Increasing afterschool programming opportunities: Parents want more afterschool programming, both academic and recreational.

Focusing on improving the health and well-being of the children: Opportunities to exercise and eat healthily during the school day came up time and again throughout the conversations, as well as the ability for a child to attend school without fear of crime or bullying.

About Lawrence CommunityWorks

Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW) is a non-profit community development corporation working with residents and other stakeholders to transform and revitalize the physical, economic, and social landscape of Lawrence, MA. They do this with a growing network of Lawrencians who are building family and community assets, providing each other with mutual support, developing leadership skills, and engaging in collective action to advance an agenda of positive growth and change. LCW activities in physical development, asset building, and organizing have created a network of over 5,000 members and leveraged over \$90 million in local investment.

About the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association

The Massachusetts Charter Public School Association (MCPSA) was founded in 2001 with the mission to serve, support, and advocate for Massachusetts charter public schools as they strive to achieve the goals of their charters. Through public policy advocacy, sharing of best practices and providing resources and services to schools, the MCPSA has played an essential role in building one of the highest quality charter school initiatives in the country.

Opening the Circle

In November of 2011, due to low student achievement, high dropout rates and low graduation rates, the MA board of elementary and secondary education declared that the Lawrence Public Schools were “Chronically Underperforming.” In January of 2012 the state appointed a receiver with the power to create sweeping changes and to develop a turnaround plan for the system. The debate over the quality of education in the city has been a long one, leaving Lawrence parents concerned about what role they can play in the process, eager to offer suggestions and support, but not always clear as to where or how they can participate. In order to have real and lasting change, and improvement in the quality of education, we are going to need parents and community members connected and supported by one another as well as empowered to engage the system in a meaningful way.

One of the components of the turnaround plan is to “Empower teachers, principals, parents, and the community: Enable educators, parents and community members to drive and lead school-level improvement.” There have been efforts made to convene stakeholder groups, including a couple of large-scale community meetings to gather parent/ community input, and there are plans underway to create a “Family Welcome Center.” These are initial steps toward increasing parent involvement, but will require consistent implementation, as well as community support and ownership, to ensure success.

During the spring and summer of 2012, realizing their mutual desire to understand and advance the educational aspirations of Lawrence parents and students, the Massachusetts Charter Public School Association (MCPSA) approached Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW) with the aim of building on LCW’s innovative approach for resident engagement, NeighborCircles, to convene groups of parents with children in both traditional public schools and charter schools throughout the city of Lawrence and to report on the results of these conversations. The purpose of this project was 1) to involve parents

in the conversation and gain a deeper understanding and insight into their concerns and desires for improving the educational achievement of their children and 2) to inform community leaders and policy makers about parental aspirations for education reform in Lawrence. LCW has long held the belief that the key to improving a community is building strong relationships of mutual support and trust. Based on this belief, they have been training residents as hosts and facilitators, and convening groups of neighbors to build the relationships necessary to tackle a variety of neighborhood and community issues in the city of Lawrence since 1999. This strategy, called NeighborCircles, is a block by block approach to building social capital: neighbors come together in someone’s home, to get to know one another, discuss local issues, and work together on a solution.

The NeighborCircle and ParentCircle Process

Many of us don’t know our neighbors and they don’t know us. We are too busy, too shy, or too intimidated to make connections and build relationships with people on our street or on our block. The fact is, in this day and age, getting to know neighbors can be hard and a bit scary. Some believe that the days of neighbors knowing each other and looking after each other’s children are over.

At LCW, we believe that all we need is practice and a safer environment to get it started. NeighborCircles is a strategic way of sparking the long-interrupted, neighbor-to-neighbor conversation once again by engaging and empowering neighbors to take on important issues. The successes we have seen in creating safe environments for moments of conversation and relationship-building that can lead to community and systemic change, led us to consider a similar strategy to engage the subject of the quality of education in the community.

The issues surrounding the school system, and the lack of opportunities for parents to meaningfully engage with it, share many

similarities with those of a neighborhood. Schools have often been perceived as large, inaccessible, and inflexible institutions. As a parent or community members faced with the enormous task of trying to better these institutions for the sake of the children, it can seem impossible. As in a neighborhood, residents can feel isolated and alone when confronting larger issues—whether they are trash and crime or low educational achievement and student safety—in the face of perceived institutional indifference.

In 2010 LCW was approached by The Community Group, an operator of a network of Commonwealth¹ charter schools in Lawrence MA, to assist them with their Promise Neighborhoods Program aimed at significantly improving the educational and development outcomes in distressed communities. LCW was asked to convene and facilitate six NeighborCircles in Lawrence’s Arlington Neighborhood to learn from parents of the neighborhood and included them in the process of improving the neighborhood and its schools. It was this experience that helped inform the development of ParentCircles.

To implement the ParentCircles, LCW and MPCSA together identified a variety of Lawrence parents and asked them to open their homes and invite other parents for two facilitated conversations about their own educational experiences, what have been the most powerful moments of learning in their own experience and what has been their experience with district schools, charter schools, and private schools in Lawrence. Once these parent hosts were identified, LCW provided a trained facilitator to lead the group through the conversations over the course of two dinners.

In order to utilize the ParentCircles as an opportunity for parents to come together, get to know one another and build relationships

focused on mutual experience and mutual support, the initial dinner conversation centered on a relationship building exercise aimed at bringing participants to a common understanding of everyone’s learning styles and how they came to be the person that they are today. Using a world map and a U.S. map, participants were asked to share their life’s journey while answering the question *“Throughout your whole life, how, what and who taught you to become the person you are today?”* At the completion of this dinner all participants were asked to come to the next dinner ready to share their experiences and thoughts about the Lawrence schools.

During the second dinner participants were asked to respond to the questions *“What do you think about the education in the Lawrence schools?”* *“What do you like about the Lawrence schools?”* *“What are your concerns about the Lawrence schools?”* and *“What recommendations do you have for improving the quality of education in the city of Lawrence?”*

Each ParentCircle meeting lasted about two hours; meetings generally were held anywhere from one day to one week apart. Throughout each meeting two LCW facilitators worked to encourage participants to go deeper in their conversations and took extensive notes of all that was mentioned.

LCW’s NeighborCircle facilitators are neighborhood leaders who have come from the membership of LCW, often after having hosted a NeighborCircle themselves. They are put through an intensive two day facilitation training and participate in a number of NeighborCircles facilitated by experienced facilitators before they are asked to facilitate one themselves. The role of the facilitator is to represent LCW and to ensure that the agenda moves smoothly and productively. Though they are keen observers of the conversations they do not insert themselves into its content; they are there to serve as guides. It was these same facilitators that facilitated the ParentCircles. They also assisted in recruiting hosts and participating in the redesign of the

¹ Commonwealth charter schools are accountable to the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education. They operate independently of local school districts.

NeighborCircle agendas to make them appropriate for the ParentCircles.

The Participants

LCW reached out to its extensive network of community members to identify 12 parents of children in Lawrence schools. Each parent was asked to host one ParentCircle—two meetings—and invite other parents of children within Lawrence schools. Twelve ParentCircles—24 meetings—were completed during the summer and fall with 131 Lawrence parents participating. All of the circle meetings were held in Spanish with English interpretation when necessary. Participants displayed an eagerness and willingness to share their experiences and impressions of Lawrence schools and required little prompting to get the conversations rolling.

Though all participants had children attending a Lawrence school, not all participants identified the school. Of those participants, including hosts, that identified the schools their children attended: 53 had children attending traditional public schools, 13 had children attending charter schools and 5 had children attending private schools.

First Dinner Meeting

Although we were looking for information during our first meeting, our focus was primarily on building relationships—the basis for a network of empowered parents equipped with the tools necessary to effectively engage the school system and reform efforts. Thus we focused the first dinner on building a comfortable environment where participants had a safe space to share their own experiences and stories.

During this initial dinner it was explained to participants that the reason for holding ParentCircle Dinners is based on a belief that good conversations will improve parental involvement in their children's education. By better understanding the needs, concerns, challenges and aspirations of parents about their children's education and the future of public education in Lawrence, deeper

relationships with parents will be formed fostering greater parent involvement in public education reform.

In order to begin to create that space and to allow participants to reflect on ways to improve the schools, we first asked participants to reflect upon their own experiences and think about the effective “education” moments in their own lives. In order to facilitate this conversation a map of the United States and a map of the world was placed on the wall. Participants were then asked to use the maps and answer the question, “Throughout your whole life how, what and who taught you to become the person you are today?”

This moment of sharing and storytelling broke the ice in the room and encouraged all of the participants to think about the people, places and moments that were their teachers throughout life and what was it about those experiences that proved to be effective teaching methods. Parents mentioned and reflected upon the people and experiences that shaped their lives. Relatives, mentors, overcoming struggle and adversity, and immigration topped the list. The central theme of character development arose as what these individuals and experiences had taught parents. This conversation then set the stage for the participants to come back and talk about how improvements could be made to the educational system in the city of Lawrence.

Second Dinner Meeting

Parents returned for a second dinner and dove deeper into the conversation about the quality of education in the city of Lawrence. Parents were asked to respond to 4 questions: 1) What are your concerns about the Lawrence Public School System?, 2) What are your positive observations of the Lawrence Public School System?, 3) What are your dreams for the future of the Lawrence Public School System?, 4) What recommendations do you have for improving the Lawrence Public School System?

During these conversations parents offered many observations and insights into the quality of education in the city of Lawrence. The following are the most resonant of the issues that were identified in the conversations; the second column details the number of ParentCircles where the issue was discussed.

Table 1

Q1. What are your concerns about the Lawrence Public School System?	# of PC where issue was discussed
Safety	11
Classroom size too large	8
Lack of quality/healthy food options	7
Poor preparation for teachers	6
Bullying	6
Lack of flexibility in the times parent meetings were offered	4
Lack of recreation, sports and exercise	4
Poor transportation	4
Lack of attention to IEPs	3
Lack of attention for problem students	3
Lack of cultural awareness	3
Lack of values (promoted or taught)	3

Table 2

Q2. What are Parent's positive observations about the LPS	# of PC where issue was discussed
Uniforms	8
After School Programs	7
Transportation	4
Good Facilities	3
Well educated teachers	3
Nurses	3

Table 3

Q3. What are your dreams for the future of the LPS	# of PC where issue was discussed
Higher quality healthy food options	11
More sports, recreation and physical education programs	10
Safer schools	6
More afterschool programs	5
Greater parent involvement	3
More bi-lingual programs and assistance for those who speak Spanish only	3
More reading and literacy programs	3

Table 4

When asked to make recommendations to the schools these were the leading (top) suggestions
1.) Dedicate more resources to teacher preparation and training
2.) Hold parent meetings during days and times that work for parents
3.) Provide support to parents so that they can offer more support for their children in the home
4.) Look for more volunteer opportunities and ways that they can participate
5.) Keep parents informed about decisions that the school is making

Facilitator Observations

LCW's facilitators have years of experience working in the community and take great pride in their ability to facilitate the conversation without inserting themselves or adding to the content. Facilitators are there to listen, observe and ensure that the conversation is productive. They brought a unique perspective to the project as a whole and to what they observed in each of the ParentCircle dinners. They spent hours not only in the meetings, but also debriefing with hosts, participants and one another. Because of this valuable perspective, it was important to gather their observations of the ParentCircle dinners.

LCW has regular check-ins with its facilitator group and spent time debriefing after each ParentCircle. The questions that were posed to the facilitators were, "What did they observe and hear during these conversations? What were the topics that got the group fired up? And what were the topics that were mentioned, that the group wasn't really interested in exploring further?"

From these conversations the most resonant concerns that facilitators observed were:

- 1) **Bullying and safety:** Parents were first and foremost concerned about the safety of their children; bullying and a general unsafe-feeling environment within and outside the schools came up multiple times.
- 2) **Classroom size:** Many parents expressed a concern that the traditional public schools had very large classroom sizes and would benefit from additional teachers to lower the size of the classroom or additional teachers' assistants to provide students with more individualized support.
- 3) **Poor parent participation in the schools:** Many parents felt that there was a lack of parents involved and engaged in school meetings and events. The number one issue that was identified was language; whether or not the school held meetings in English and Spanish, had bi-lingual staff (teachers in particular) and had materials in both languages had a huge impact on whether or not the parents felt comfortable in the school. They also expressed that much of this was because the meetings were held during times that were inconvenient for parents and conflicted with work schedules. There was also a concern due to the lack of Spanish translation during school events.
- 4) **Parents felt disempowered when it comes to their child's education:** Parents did not feel that there were sufficient avenues for them to make suggestions about how to improve curriculum or to influence other decisions made by the schools.
- 5) **Lack of courses teaching social values:** Parents were concerned that schools did not do a good job in promoting and teaching character formation. In a few circles the idea of religious instruction arose, but the majority of parents expressed that they wanted their children to be taught respect and to treat others as you would yourself want to be treated.
- 6) **Lack of attention to Individual Education Plans (IEPs):** Parents felt there was a lack of staff time and attention dedicated to IEPs and a lack of follow through for these students.
- 7) **Health:** Parents expressed a desire to see more healthy food options, and opportunities for their children to engage in physical activity during the school day.
- 8) **Longer school day:** Parents appeared to be very supportive of extending the school day, but the facilitators pointed out that they were more interested in afterschool programming that focused on the arts and recreation over increased academic time.

Facilitator Observations About Lawrence Charter Schools

The consensus within the group was that of all parents that participated (parents of children in the traditional public schools and parents of children in the charter schools), there was a notable difference between traditional public schools and charter schools. Lawrence's Commonwealth charter schools enroll almost 1,200 students. Demand for seats in Lawrence's charter schools is strong. There are over 4,440 Lawrence students on the waiting list for a seat in a charter school. The waiting list for charter school seats is second only to Boston's. In addition, four charter management organizations are actively involved in the district's turnaround plan.

Charter schools were identified as having excellent and dedicated teachers as well as high parent involvement. We asked the facilitators to reflect on the differences of opinion they observed of the traditional public schools and the charter schools. Of those differences the most resonant were:

Parent participation: The charter schools have a much greater level of parent participation. This is due, in part, to a perception that parents are required/mandated to participate and that the teachers and administration appear to be highly dedicated and motivated to get parents involved with the schools. The facilitators expressed that in the charter schools there are clear expectations that are set from the moment the student is enrolled in the school that the parents are required to participate. Along with this requirement comes a persistence in following up with the parents to ensure that they are participating. The facilitators suggested that the traditional public schools should also implement a mandatory participation requirement for parents.

One facilitator noted that before the school starts, in the summer, charter school teachers visit the homes of children and that the teachers interview the families about their daycare experience. It is these observations

and connections that create a strong relationship between the family and the school.

In Lawrence's traditional public schools, the primary method for parents to participate in the schools is through the parent teacher meetings. The facilitators noticed that parents were frustrated by the fact that this was the only time for them to participate and also that there were occasions where the meetings were held in English only, which made it difficult for many parents to effectively communicate.

The facilitators also observed that parents were looking for opportunities to volunteer in the public schools, but found that few opportunities to get involved existed.

Teacher and administration dedication: There was a general belief that the employees of the charter schools are more dedicated to the educational success of the children.

Educational quality: There was a sense that the education at the charter schools was better than that of the traditional public schools. The facilitators believed that the education is better at the charter schools because the curriculum is more rigorous, demanding more of the students, and because of this students leave the charter schools better prepared to enter college.

The Follow-up

In order to gain a clearer understanding of what some parents had reported and what the facilitators had observed we decided to follow-up with participants to ask some clarifying questions of the parents. All of the participants from the ParentCircles were contacted by phone and asked to answer some additional clarifying questions. We made two attempts to reach each of the parents, but we were unable to have them all complete the follow-up survey. This was in part due to the holidays and the personal demands of our facilitator team and those of the parents. Of the parent participants, about 25% completed the follow-up survey.

The questions and responses are as follows:

1. What expectations do you have for being involved in your child's school?

When we posed this question we noticed that parents had a difficult time answering. It is unclear as to why parents were not able to articulate what they expect as far as being involved in their child's school, but one thing that we gathered from our conversations with parents during the initial Parent Circles was that there are cultural differences that exist in how parents view their involvement in their child's school. The overwhelming majority of participants were first or second generation immigrants to Lawrence from the Dominican Republic, where teachers are viewed as a figure of authority responsible for the education of the children and the parents do not feel that it is their place to question that authority. There is a separation between the education that occurs in the home and the education in the schools and it is possible that it is this cultural belief that informs their experience in Lawrence.

2. Are there specific schools that have better parent participation? Which ones? Why is participation better in these schools?

When responding to this question many parents were unable to comment because they did not have experience with more than one school within the system. However, those that did have an opinion felt that the schools with high parent participation had the following characteristics:

- A focus and dedication that both the administration and the teachers had regarding parent involvement.
- Mandatory involvement required by the schools.
- Flexible meeting times and strong communication, through which parents were consulted about the times that would work for them to meet.
- Social events aimed at building connections and relationships.

3. What makes a school more welcoming to parents? Are there schools that you feel more welcome in? Why?

Parents feel that what makes a school welcoming or not welcoming has almost everything to do with how seriously the administration and the teachers make an effort to connect with parents and make them feel welcome. The factors that parents identified as being an indicator of how serious a school is to welcome parents are:

- The personal attitude that the teachers and administration convey to the parents and the students.
- Having lots of communication between the parents, teachers and administration
- When the teachers and administration work to guide parents and educate them on how to participate and navigate the school system, as well as encouraging parents to take the responsibility of their child's education seriously.
- When the school makes serious attempts at gathering the input of the parents in the decisions of the school, and also asks the parents about when are the most appropriate times for meetings with parents.
- Ensuring that the schools have appropriate resources for translation.
- Having fun social events to bring parents and community members into the schools to connect.

4. Many parents have reported that charter schools have better parent participation. Why do you believe this is?

When parents were asked to respond to this question there was a feeling that the charter schools in general placed a greater focus on parent participation. Because of this the teachers and administration are better prepared and see it as a part of their role to engage and include parents. Parents of children in the charter schools noted that they are

always receiving calls and communication pushing them to get involved and participate.

As well as a greater dedication from teachers and staff, parents stated that the charter schools insist that parent participation is strongly encouraged and convey that message clearly from the moment a child enrolls.

It should be noted that there are traditional public schools in Lawrence in which the parents noted that they also felt the teachers and administration were dedicated to including the parents. The most notable school that emerged from this conversation was the Frost School where parent participation is also high.

5. Parents mentioned that their children are receiving a better education at charter schools, have you observed this? What is different about the education they are receiving?

Those that responded in agreement with the question identified three major areas where they felt the charter schools differed from the traditional public schools:

- The high level of parent involvement and consistent communication between the parents and the teachers.
- That there was more time spent on the academic preparation of the students and that they had a more concrete and well-developed educational plan.
- That there were tighter controls, discipline and expectations placed on the students.

6. Would you like to see a longer school day? If yes, would you like more academic time, more afterschool programming, recreation time, etc?

A significant majority, 91 percent, indicated support for a longer school day. Of those respondents who specified the type of extended day programming that they would like to see, more afterschool programming (recreation, arts, etc.) was mentioned the most, followed by more academic programming.

It is also worth noting that most parents would like to see extended day/afterschool programming to be offered free of charge.

7. Are there programs or services that charter schools or other successful schools have that you would like to see in all Lawrence schools?

- Family counseling that includes home visits.
- Bilingual programming
- The Bread Loaf Writing program
- Uniforms
- Homework clubs
- Increased sports programming
- Offer students the ability to work on projects like they do at the Vocational School.
- More art and music classes.

8. What suggestions do you have for improving poorly performing schools in Lawrence?

Of all the suggestions that parents had the three that stood out as the most resonant were:

Teacher preparation: Schools need to dedicate more time and energy into preparing their teachers. This relates to academic preparation, but also to cultural preparation. Teachers should be encouraged and helped to learn Spanish and the local culture as well as be given tools to help them build deeper connections and relationships with parents.

Encourage more parent participation and communication between parents and teachers: Parents want to be involved and connected with their children's teachers, but are struggling to find ways in which to do so.

More afterschool programming: Parents would love to see more opportunities for their children to engage in recreation and arts based activities, free of cost.

Conclusion

The ParentCircles provided Lawrence parents with an opportunity to connect with other parents in the community and discuss issues close to the heart, the education of their children. It was obvious to us that parents were eager to have conversations about the quality of education in the city, but also to see changes and improvements in the system. Although the conversations touched on many topics there was a consensus that emerged around several key points: 1) Strengthening relationships between Lawrence parents and teachers; 2) Learning from successful practices of Lawrence Charter Schools in engaging parents and promoting educational excellence; 3) Increasing afterschool programming opportunities; and, 4) Focusing on improving the health and well being of the children.

Strengthening relationships between Lawrence parents and teachers: Parents expressed a disconnect between the teachers and the community and wanted to see more opportunities to build relationships and gain a deeper understanding of each other's experiences and expectations that are brought to the classroom.

Learning from successful practices of Lawrence Charter Schools in engaging parents and promoting educational excellence: There is a perception within the city of Lawrence that the charter schools have higher parent participation. There are varying opinions as to why this is—parents are strongly encourage to participate, teachers and administrators dedicate more time to reach out to parents—but a consensus that the schools are doing something right when it comes to getting parents in the door. A more rigorous curriculum better preparing students for college was also noted.

Increasing afterschool programming opportunities: Parents want more afterschool programming both academic and recreational.

Focusing on improving the health and well-being of the children: Opportunities to exercise and eat healthily during the school day came up time and again throughout the conversations as well as the ability for a child to attend school without fear of crime or bullying.

Thank you!

LCW wants to express our appreciation to the numerous parents who gave honest and insightful feedback through this process. We believe that parents and students are two of our greatest resources in this City, and look forward to continuing the work inspired by these conversations.



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