

On the evening of Wednesday, February 19, 2020, the Worcester Education Justice Alliance (WEJA) in collaboration with several other community-based organizations hosted a community forum to offer community input into how the new funding allocated through the Student Opportunity Act should be utilized in the Worcester Public schools. There were 90 people in attendance, 72 of whom completed a survey expressing their positions on issues and offering some demographic consideration. As people entered, they were asked to complete the survey. Some of the attendees (mostly those who arrived late) did not complete the survey. After some brief introductory comments and instructions, attendees were divided into six groups: Youth, Educators (including K12 and college level), Parents, Community Members, Latinx Community members (this breakout group was conducted in Spanish), and African Community members. After meeting in these subgroups, the groups then re-sorted into six groups with representatives from each of the breakout groups to share what each breakout group had talked about. What follows is our summary of the data that was gathered that evening in three different sections: 1) the data of who was in the room, 2) the data gathered from the sign-in survey and 3) the data gathered in the six breakout groups.

Who was in the room?

The room was very diverse in terms of race, language, gender and age. Indeed, we had several Spanish speaking attendees that formed a sub-group in Spanish, and many different people from a diverse group of African countries also formed their own sub-group. Nearly half of the attendees were people of color. Based on the results from the people who completed the survey the attendees self-reported as follows:

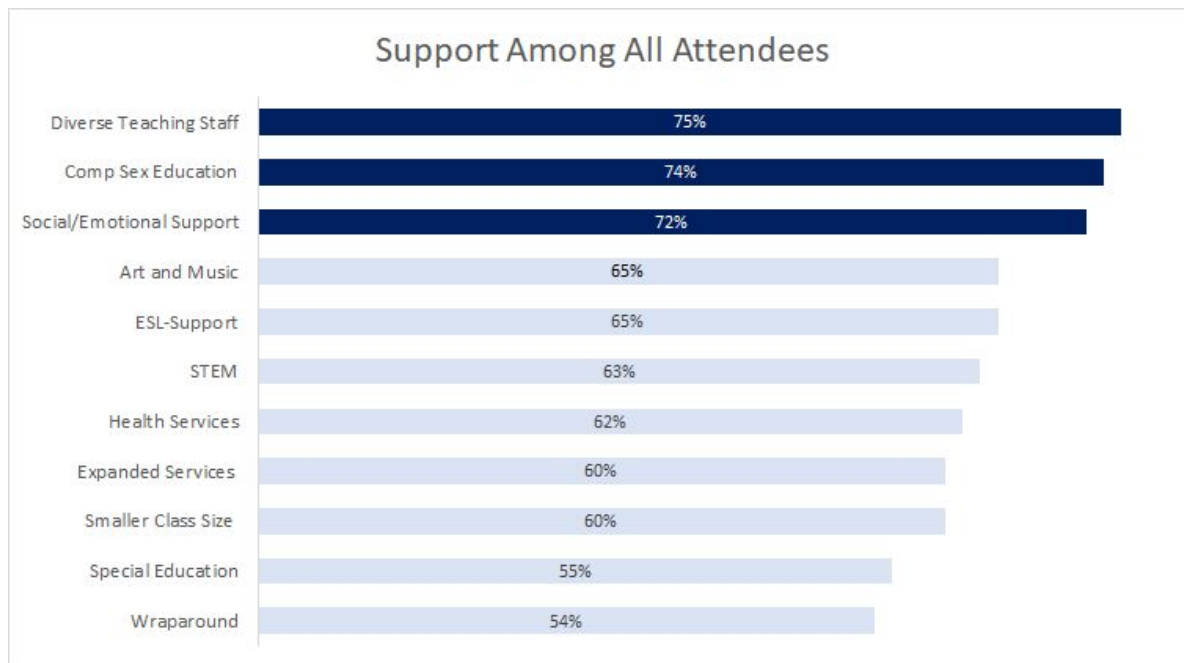
- Community Members: 51%
- Parent/Guardians: 25%
- Youth/Students: 15%
- Educators: 9%

Students, parents and educators were also asked to identify which schools in the district they attend, their children attend, or they work in. The following schools had affiliated students/parents/teachers represented at the forum: Burncoat High, Burncoat Middle, Canterbury Elementary, Chandler Magnet Elementary, Doherty High, Elm Park Elementary, Heard Street Elementary, North High, Roosevelt Elementary, South High, Sullivan Middle, Webster Square Daycare, Woodland Academy Elementary, and Worcester Technical High. Those are the schools that were listed, but several parents/guardians and students left that section blank.



Data collected from the survey?

The Sign-in Survey was answered by 72 of the events attendees. Individuals were presented with a list of causes and asked which they support, with an option to write in any additional matters they wished to highlight for particular support. The results were as follows, showing the level of support for each cause among all attendees who answered the question:



Staff diversity, Comprehensive Sex-Education, and Increased Social/Emotional Support for students were the three causes ranked highest among all event attendees. These three causes saw similarly high levels of support among self-designated “Community Members” as well as “Educators” who attended the event. It is also worth noting that 100% of the Educators who attended the event listed “Increased Social/Emotional Support” as an important cause. Students who attended the event had a slightly different breakdown, with “Art and Music Funding”, “Sex-Education”, and “STEM” having the highest support among that demographic.

Attendees were also asked if WPS had communicated with them in their native language, if that language is not English. 21 individuals answered that this question was applicable to them, with 11 (52% of respondents) answering that they had received communications from WPS in their native language, while 10 (48% of respondents) had not.

Data gathered from the breakout groups?

As indicated above, people were quickly separated into six different breakout groups: Youth, Educators (including K12 and college level), Parents, Community Members, Latinx Community members (this breakout group was conducted in Spanish), and African Community members. Discussion occurred in a free-flowing manner, with each group given the same series of question prompts to begin: 1) What is going well in the public schools? 2) What could be improved? 3) What do we need to do to get there? In the attachment following this report we

share out the notes from the different breakout groups. These conversations were free-flowing and generated a lot of different ideas. Please see the attachments to learn more.

Voting by 3 Dots

At the very end of the meeting, everyone was handed three dots and invited to stick the dots on any one, two or three of the several pages that had different initiatives associated with them. As you will see the categories are somewhat different from the sign-in survey. Also, these results are important in our analysis, because attendees could only select three, so the ones that received a lot of dots reflect a strong commitment from the members of the community involved in this forum. Listed below are the initiatives (followed by the number of dots/votes by participants in parentheses).

- Hiring Diverse School Personnel (53)
- Wrap-around Services for Students Social & Emotional Health (30)
- Support for English Learners & Special Education (24)
- Professional Development for Teachers (18)
- Expanding Curriculum (i.e. Field Trips, Asian Studies, Sex Ed.) (13)
- Early Education and Pre-K Programs (12)
- Expanded Learning Time (Afterschool and Summer Programs) (10)
- Purchase Materials & Equipment (8)
- Common Planning Time for Teachers (1)

Consistent with the preferences from the sign-in survey, the two initiatives most strongly supported were hiring a diverse faculty and staff and providing social and emotional learning supports. ESL support was the fifth highest category in the sign-in survey and the category of support for English Language Learners and Special Education was the third highest in the dot selection. However, the dot selection did not have an option for more focus on Art and Music nor a separate category that focused on sex education, which were ranked high in the sign-in survey.

Conclusions

As the Student Opportunity Act makes clear, it is important that the use of the funds takes seriously the input from community members. The Act specifies that schools districts must “consider input and recommendations from parents and other relevant community stakeholders.” We held this forum to ensure that the voice of a diverse group of parents, youth, educators and other community members is heard and incorporated into the proposal.

Additionally, the plans must address “persistent disparities in achievement among student subgroups” and must be evidenced-based. Based on the voice of the people in our forum and consistent with the mandates of the law, we expect the Worcester Public Schools to develop a three-year proposal that includes evidenced-based initiatives to address the inequities facing our district related to race, language and low-income. These proposals should clearly identify strategic and evidenced-based plans to:

Highest Priority:

- 1. Increase the racial and linguistic diversity of faculty, staff and administrators in the district.** This can be done by hiring more teachers and staff to reduce class size and implementing initiatives that have proven track-records for increasing the racial and linguistic diversity of faculty and staff.
- 2. Improve Social and Emotional Learning and Supports for Students.** There are numerous programs that research has revealed effectively address the social and emotional learning and support needs of students and have been proven to increase the educational outcomes for all students, but particularly students dealing with the social toxins of racism, poverty and other forms of marginalization our students face (i.e. language, immigration status, violence, etc.)

High Priority

- 3. Improve support for English Language Learners.** In addition to hiring culturally and linguistically diverse teachers and staff, we need the proposal to include strategic initiatives that ensure the Worcester Public Schools more effectively educate students who are English Language Learners.
- 4. Ensure implementation of a comprehensive sex education curriculum.** Attendees expressed deep disappointment that in 2020, Worcester Public Schools have implemented no comprehensive sex education curriculum. Worcester needs to choose one of the approved programs of the WISH taskforce and implement the curriculum immediately.

We as a community will be reviewing the district's proposal to ensure it is consistent with the mandates of the law as it was passed and to confirm that it incorporates the will of the people as evidenced in the findings from this forum.

ATTACHMENT

Students

Perceived Strengths

In their discussion, the youth expressed a feeling of appreciation for teachers who, they feel, put in extra effort and offer to help after school. Students felt that these teachers went beyond what their job required of them.

Perceived Weaknesses

Despite positive experiences with educators, the students wished that these teachers had more support, and that there were more funds available to support help after school.

Perceived Solutions

The students identified several areas that they thought were vital to improving their educational experience and outcomes. These included:

- More funding for after school help
- More guidance counselors who show more empathy and less judgement
- More in depth education on drug risks and consequences
- More peer mediators
- More health class options
- “In depth” support for students
- Community group lead after school programs
- Bilingual councilors and staff
- Diverse staff and faculty
- Diversity trainings
- A later start to the school day
- More expansive and relevant curriculum.

Discussion

The students also felt that more mental health services for youth could help to alleviate many of the underlying problems facing schools and called for the formation of peer groups to discuss problems, “because in these groups there is less judgement.”

The youth indicated a desire for more communication and youth involvement in decision making, including through surveys and creating safe spaces for students.

Students also pointed out that there were, in many schools, hinderances to students sharing with each other; instead, they believe, students should be encouraged and assisted in sharing.

The students' group was one of several that kept track of how their members would vote. The results are listed in the chart below; their top three priorities are art and music education, sex education, and education in the STEM fields.

Latinx Group

Perceived Strengths

The Latinx group pointed listed two things they perceived as working well in the schools: the community partnerships Worcester Public Schools has forged, and interactions with educators. On the latter, there was a caveat added, which is that these interactions are only good “when we get to know [the educators].”

Perceived Weaknesses

This group perceived several areas needing improvement in the public school system. These included a cultural divide (by ethnicity and class), schools not being welcoming of international students, hinderances in enrollment access and transfer of credits for international students, high suspension rates of Latinx students, too many public safety officers, not enough recruitment and retention of people of color educators, and WPS spending money on lawsuits instead of finding and solving root problems.

Perceived Solutions

The group thought that many of the problems could be solved through greater accountancy and transparency. They additionally suggested a community-inclusive process regarding leadership, and civic engagement and leadership courses for students.

Discussion

The Latinx group had several suggestions arising from their discussion, including:

- The superintendent should be an elected position
- Less in the way of speeches from officials at meetings, and more time for input
- More diversity in the administration
- Amending the city charter to create a school committee based on district, instead of at-large, seats

- More afterschool offerings
- More wraparound services
- Expanded community partnerships, especially with diverse groups like African Community Education, the Latino Education Institute, the Southeast Asian Coalition, and local colleges
- More technical education with adult and alumni education in evenings

Community

Perceived Strengths

The community group identified the following as key strengths in the school system:

- Real efforts to expand vocational programs throughout the whole system
- The magnet schools

Perceived Weaknesses

One group member, addressing the concern of persistent systemic racism, said, “You cannot change our problems in our schools if you do it with a white lens.” This quote was met with enthusiastic support, and the community group felt that it should be considered as underlying the weaknesses listed. These included:

- De facto segregation in the school district.
- A lack of progress in addressing racial disparities from the administration
- Systemic issues regarding disparities in the schools
- Discipline rules are more suited for a prisons than schools
- Suspensions for students in grades K-2, while other districts have banned this.
- Confusing legal suspension criteria regarding chapter 222. Students are being suspended in a way that is inconsistent with the law
- Dangerous substances in the schools
- Not enough diversity in staff
- Failing to prepare students for problems outside of school
- Students with disabilities and English language learners not getting adequate support
- Inadequate staffing in general
- There is not equal access to magnet programs
- Hiring drug educators as a solution to racial disparity
- Vocational programs are shifted to the more elite
- Schools are not hiring experts in cultural diversity

Perceived Solutions

A dominant theme in the group's discussion was that there are systemic and racial elements involved in all of the problems of the Worcester Public Schools.

Suggested solutions included:

- Training that gets to the root of systemic and institutional racism. This training be provided by recognized experts and must be ongoing with strong goals and results that shows systemic changes.
- On teacher diversity, outreach to people of color and retention people of color.
- Staff needs to reflect our community
- Work with community that have access to stakeholders
- Alternatives to disciplinary exclusion, including restorative practices; bring in experts who know how to do this. This might require legal action.
- Decolonize the curriculum; include indigenous stories and history.
- Research successful restorative justice programs
- Universal Pre-K
- School department stops operating in silos partner with outside entities
- More youth voices and implementing their suggestions
- More transparency with data, look at patterns vis a vis ethnicity
- Truth telling about how educators of color have been treated in WPS
- Regular reporting to community
- Regularly mobilize partners and community members to school committee.

The community group also tracked how their members would vote on the suggested proposals. The results can be seen in the chart below. Diverse teaching staff, English Learner Support, and Sex Education were the top three vote-getting areas.

Parents

The format of the parents' discussion was slightly different, and resulted in the following:

Perceived weaknesses

- Systemic racism, and work on the decolonization of curriculum
- Lack of cultural responsiveness
- Lack of empathy, which is evident in the dress code

- Lack of health classes
- Students show a “lack of joy”
- Need for arts education
- Not enough in the way of financial literacy education
- Not enough support for English language learners
- Disproportionate and unequal use of suspensions
- Lack of mutual respect
- Alternative programs used too much, have serious issues, and are not helping students learn
- Alternative programs seem to be getting their own funding
- Homework in elementary schools is too much
- Not enough teaches of color

Perceived solutions

- Increased accountability
- Relational pedagogy
- Build trust and relationships between parents and teachers
- Restorative justice
- Amend dress code to take better take into account ethnic and racial distinctions
- A broad health and sex education curriculum
- Hire more teachers
- More transparent suspension data
- Build mutual respect
- Consistently placement of specialists to maintain relationships
- Better public transportation
- Smaller class sizes
- Seal of biliteracy for all languages
- Recruit more teachers of color
- Instead of “check box” work on diversity, hire outside facilitators for cultural responsiveness to create real cultural change with real commitment
- In addition to already existing honors programming, programming for kids who need to close gaps in their education
- More welcoming of, and better, community engagement
- More school adjustment councilors, especially those that share students’ experiences.

Additional discussion

- More support for deaf and hard of hearing
- More dual language programs
- Free preschool and more early childhood access with more available hours

- More after school programs
- Remove barriers to vocational education
- End high stakes testing
- Capital improvements for student and staff safety
- Robust, comprehensive general education programs that meet youth “where they are”
- SEL coaches and support for teachers and parents in teams

African and African American

Perceived strengths

- Modern programs like robotics and coding
- School choice
- Partnerships with community groups (ACE, LEI, SEAC). These programs lift up our students and families to help them become successful

Perceived weaknesses

- Disparities across schools: some are thriving while some are failing
- Resources and programs not uniform across the district
- Cultural barriers for students and parents new to the country
- Not enough funding to partnership programs
- Lack of transportation is a sometimes insurmountable barrier to students’ participation in vital activities
- Not enough diversity
- Not enough paths for parents to be involved in their children’s education

Perceived solutions

- District school committee seats: this will help to create policy that will lift up the challenges that our diverse youth are facing.
- Build partnerships similar to those already existing with other community organizations
- Better funding for partnership programs
- Provide all schools with the same level of resources
- Better transportation, especially for students participating in school choice and to afterschool programs
- Cultural competency and anti-racism training

- Hire and retain people of color, including Africans and African Americans
- ESL teachers to be better versed in different cultures, because culture is the center of understanding language
- Those at the decision-making table need to reflect the whole community
- Include Africans and African Americans in school-based decisions and site councils
- Real investments in community liaisons
- Create welcome centers in the schools where new immigrant parents are welcomed and given an orientation to the public schools and what to expect for that year for their student
- A university-established organization similar to the Latino Education Institute for African and African American education in the city
- Better communication between parents and educators
- Student surveys with transparent aggregated result to help expose school climate issues
- Wraparound coordinators, nurses, ESL teachers, support staff at each school
- Mental health programs for Black and brown students staffed by culturally competent professionals
- More civics education that covers current affairs and helps students understand and become voters
- A Mayor's commission on African education and on African American education similar to the work being done with the Mayors Commission on Latino Education

Additional discussion

- School uniforms
- A newsletter that can be translated into many languages
- Allow parents to see syllabi so that they can understand and support their kids in their classes. Engaged parents help create ownership in our schools.
- We would also like to see the youth representatives on the school committee actually have voting power
- Collect data that disaggregates the different categories of "Black." Create an option for African so that we can track these differences to be able to see more accurate trends and themes, to analyze problems better, and to create more targeted solutions
- School committee members should be brought into every schools and connected with students, parents, teachers and staff so that they have a better understanding of the concerns and challenges faced at each school

Educators

Perceived strengths

- UPCS alumni are performing well: they are strong in hard skills, highly academic areas. Many students are also strong in soft skills and are interested in their education,
- Heritage Spanish speakers pick up transferable skills and are very successful.

Perceived weaknesses

- High stakes testing and prescribed curriculum does not promote critical thinking and can be a big barrier especially for students learning English, as well as creating bored students and hindering teachers from having flexibility and creativity in their teaching
- Lack of realistic career development training
- Overwhelming workload for students and teachers
- There is only a late bus (afterschool) 2 days a week
- Sorely lacking funds for technology (often no daily access for students)
- Students are behind in STEM academic background
- teachers do not feel connected to the community and need more guidance in how to foster relationships in the community
- Not enough connection between students and teachers

Perceived solutions

- Better STEM programs
- Better technology
- Lessen workload of educators
- More arts programming
- More food available for everyone
- More vocational programming
- Experiential learning, paid internships, employer mentoring, project-based learning
- Professional respect and autonomy for teachers
- More collaboration with educators for PD
- Less standardized testing
- Better communication between educators and parents
- More respect for educators
- More mentorship programming for youth

Additional discussion

- Bring teachers together with education researchers
- Emulate Newton North, which has so many arts opportunities

- Funded free arts programs during and after school
- Vocational opportunities that are accessible so that everyone can have exposure to them
- Experiential learning
- Create and expand paid internships and employers mentoring needs
- Mentorship that helps struggling students
- Students perform better with shop and art.
- Engaging students earlier
- Help young students help build self-esteem; community can play a big role in this.
- More project-based learning
- More respect for the profession of teaching, including valuing teachers' autonomy
- Collaboration with teachers for professional development
- More food available for everyone in our schools

The educators kept track of their votes on the suggested proposals; the results are shown in the chart below. The top three suggestions were social and emotional learning, hiring a more diverse teaching staff, and art and music.