

BURLINGTON SCHOOL DISTRICT

Building a Learning Community

To: Burlington Residents
From: Superintendent Jeanne Collins
Date: January 9, 2008
Subject: **Summary of Fifth Element Parent Phone Survey**

Research on "What Parents Want in Burlington Schools" was presented to the school board and members of the community on Tuesday, January 8th, 2008 by Fifth Element Associates, an independent research group. This research study marks a major milestone in the Burlington Schools' Excellence and Equity planning. A summary of this research is provided below, as well as the methodology and background information. The full presentation is available on the district website at www.bsdyt.org.

I am inspired by the outpouring of information. I have heard you. **The survey highlighted our community's shared values – instilling a lifelong love of learning, helping every child reach their potential, building on our diversity, and engaging and involving parents, community members and organizations. These shared values are the foundation and guiding vision for Burlington's schools.** I believe we are on the right track, getting this valuable information to shape our work on excellence for all students in all of our schools.

So what is next? The Board spent the week reading through the material they have, and met with Fifth Element on January 15th to ask questions, and sift through it together. The board is currently discussing the next steps in this process, and identifying crucial decisions points.

Note on Survey Funding: Please note that this project was funded in its entirety by the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative of the United States' Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Justice. No State of Vermont or Burlington School District funds were used to support this project.

Background on Research Study

Fifth Element, an independent research group based in Colchester, Vermont, conducted the research on how parents define excellence for their children's elementary education, and which educational features are most important to them. More than one-third of Burlington's elementary school parents were surveyed by phone. The phone survey was representative of parents across the district. The same survey, available online, was open to all. To further understand parent opinion, Fifth Element also conducted focus groups.

The research followed the October 9th school board resolution to conduct independent research to gather more information about parent interest in magnet schools. After reviewing proposals from a number of companies, the district hired Fifth Element using funds from a federal grant.

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Research Summary: What's Important to Parents (unranked)

- Parents want their children to get more exposure to, and education in, the arts
- Parents want the environment addressed in everything from the school building to what is taught in the classroom
- Parents in general want more subjects to be taught and they want them to be more connected to real life
- Parents want the school to be more connected to/integrated with the community
- Parents want more opportunities to be involved in the schools
- Individual attention for their child is very important to parents
- Great educators are key, along with communication and low teacher/student ratios
- Diversity brings many benefits to the classroom

Research Summary: Feedback on the Process

- Parents appreciate the opportunity for input and that they are included in the process
- Some parents remain concerned that changes will involve redistricting, bussing, and/or mandatory participation
- Parents are tiring of process and want progress made

Research Summary: Desired Next Steps

- Parents want all children to benefit and all schools to become Dream Schools
- Now is the opportunity to inspire all with this compelling vision of educational excellence that also includes the aspirations of teachers, administrators, and community residents
- Now is the time to create and implement a strategic (and communication) plan that:
 - Keeps all connected to the vision and remains true to its collective hopes and aspirations
 - Strengthens the sense of unity and trust within the community

Research Summary: Interest in “Dream School”

- More than half of all parents definitely want the “Dream School” explored and the option to choose; 7 out of 10 view exploration and choice favorably
- 56% of current K-5 parents would likely apply to the “Dream School” (as they defined it) if it were located at Barnes or Wheeler
- 46% of Champlain, Edmunds, Flynn and Smith families would likely apply to a Barnes or Wheeler Dream School

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In the survey, parents were asked to indicate their interest in twenty-two different “Dream School” features.

Top 10 “Dream School” Features (as ranked by parents in the survey)

1. Individualized approach to teaching
2. Hands on activities
3. Connect arts to reading, math, sciences, social studies
4. Energy efficient building with natural light and gardens
5. Partnership with Flynn, Vermont Youth Orchestra and others
6. Language other than English
7. World studies
8. Advanced classes
9. Connects environment and local issues to reading, math, sciences, social studies
10. Dance, music, theater, drama

In the survey, parents were asked to indicate the importance of key educational elements.

Top 10 most important elements in any school (as ranked by parents in the survey)

1. Good mix of subjects
2. Communication with teachers/principal
3. Parental involvement
4. Individual attention
5. Teacher reputations
6. Classroom diversity
7. More arts/music/movement/drama
8. Programs for gifted children
9. Reputation of principal
10. More science education

Groups/Interviews: What is Excellence in Elementary School?

- Fosters a love of learning
- Provides a solid foundation in basic academic and social skills
- Prepares children to be successful in school as they grow and mature
- Encourages and challenges each child to realize his or her potential
- Reinforces school’s role as the “glue” that binds the community together

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Notes on Research Methodology

Phone Survey

Contact was attempted with every K-5 custodial parent/guardian in the school district (1,469 total) – as many as 6 attempts were made. Everyone with whom contact was established and who wished to be interviewed was included

- Telephone survey of 314 families with a child in one of the six K-5 schools in Burlington, including bilingual parents
- 26 in person interviews with non-English speaking parents of K-5 children
- 93 Internet surveys of Burlington pre-school parents and 54 with K-5 parents with children in independent schools
- Quantitative research focused on a large number of participants to capture breath of responses (margin of error +/-3%)
- Surveys were randomly selected and proportional by
 - School enrollment
 - Child's lunch program
 - Language spoken at home

Focus Groups

Insight (focus) groups and in-depth telephone interviews among parents of K-5 and pre-elementary school-aged children

- Qualitative research focused on a small number participants (23) to add depth and to understand the cultural context
- Three insight (focus) groups: One among K-5 parents, One among preschool parents, One among parents with K-5 children who were home schooled, in private/independent schools, or varianced from one public elementary school to another
- In-depth telephone interviews supplemented the groups
- Qualitative groups and interview recruitment (All different income levels and backgrounds were included):
 - Contacted a percentage of K-5 parents from quantitative data collection list
 - Identified and contacted daycare, nurseries, playgroups, preschools in Burlington, and private/independent K-5 schools
 - Posted flyers and used word of mouth, referrals

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