

**South Whidbey School District  
Community Engagement Team  
Report on the Community Forum – May 8, 2006**

**Introduction**

The Community Engagement Team is pleased to provide this report summarizing the activities and results of this spring's Community Forum. The report includes an Appendix containing all comments from the Forum participants, and materials illustrating the techniques and handouts used in the event.

The CE Team feels the results of this Forum point to some very clear conclusions and recommendations. We provide these thoughts to facilitate continued progress in enabling the District and the community to work together to continue to improve South Whidbey educational opportunities.

**Background**

Following the success of the May 2004 and May 2005 Community Forums, which covered budgetary issues (2004) and preparing students for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2005), the South Whidbey School Board worked to increase collaboration and communication between the South Whidbey community and our school system.

The Community Engagement Team (comprised of community, parent, teacher, Board and administrative representatives) was formed in Fall 2005 to assist with that goal. The Team was charged with designing and holding the 2006 Forum to continue work on increasing student achievement through partnerships between the schools and the community.

**Community Forum Design**

The Team decided to focus the 2006 Forum on the top four categories of interest expressed in comments at the 2005 Forum: Academics, Applied Learning, Athletics/Activities, and the Arts. The focus question was "How can our community help increase Student Achievement in the areas of (each of the above)?" Parents, staff and community members were invited to participate via e-mail, postal invitations, take-home Tuesday flyers, and a newspaper article. (*See Appendix*)

A "Drivers and Barriers" exercise was used for participant input. It is a systems process designed to go in-depth into each of the four categories. The exercise asked participants to identify the factors that assist and that prevent the community from actively engaging with the school system. Table facilitators drawn from the Team, teaching staff and the community were trained to lead the exercise. On sheets handed out to participants, we provided comments from the 2005 Forum on each subject area as well as information on many current school efforts to involve the community. (*See Appendix*)

At the event, participants were seated at tables pertaining to one of the four subject areas; they could select the category they wished to address or be assigned to one if they had no preference. Led by the facilitator, each table generated their lists of "Drivers" and

“Barriers” to community participation, and then selected their three most important “Barriers” from the lists. A separate list (the “Idea Bank”) captured other participant opinions and comments not directly related to the exercise. *(See appendix for full list.)* The three priority Barriers from each table were entered on large sheets at the front of the room and read aloud to the entire group.

All participants were then asked to determine the top priority Barriers across all categories by doing “Value Voting”, using six dots each for “voting”. Dots could be placed on as many “Barriers” as they wished in any of the four categories. Votes were tallied so the group could see the highest priority items selected. *(See Appendix for full list of priorities and votes)*

### **The Community Forum**

A welcoming, non-meeting atmosphere was created for the event in the High School New Commons with donated floral table decorations, refreshments and music. Sign-in sheets were available for attendees to record e-mail addresses for future school updates.

Display tables were staffed by various youth-serving agencies or organizations that collaborate or partner with the schools, so attendees could learn more about them and sign up to volunteer. At the start of the Forum, emcee Dave Haworth recognized several groups that have successfully involved community volunteers in the schools.

Approximately 100 people attended the Forum. There were approximately four tables focused on Academics; two on Applied Learning; two on The Arts; and one on Athletics/Activities.

Susie Richards provided background on Community Engagement in South Whidbey School District, and Board President Rich Parker reviewed the history and intent of SWSD Community Forums. Jamie Boyd led the group through the Drivers & Barriers process. At the end, Board member Helen Price Johnson said the results will provide the School District with information about what is important to South Whidbey, and Superintendent Bob Brown thanked everyone for coming.

### **Community Forum Results**

The highest-ranked Barriers, according to the number of dots/votes, were:

- 29 – No integration of community resources into curriculum *[Academics]*
- 19 – School system isn’t organized to maximize the diverse pool of potential community volunteers *[Applied Learning]*
- 17 – No volunteer coordinator *[Academics]*
- 17 – Lack of professional development for teachers addressing systemic issues that affect academic learning *[Applied Learning]*

The Community Engagement Team reflected on the results after the event using an “Interrelationship Diagram.” The diagram takes the top vote-getters in each of the four categories, charts relationships among them (if any) and attempts to find the primary or root cause of the issue by asking “which affects which the most?” *(See Appendix)*

By this method, the root causes in each category were determined to be:

*Academics* – No volunteer coordinator

*Applied Learning* – Lack of central organizing force for matching resources to need

*Activities/Athletics* – Lack of community education and coordination

*The Arts* – Need community support for stable funding for a position to provide pathways for community members to participate in the arts and other subjects.

The CE Team’s interpretation of “volunteer coordinator” in this context is broader than simply helping to place volunteers in classrooms. A more accurate title might be “Resource Coordinator” or “Partnership Coordinator.” Any position designed to enhance community involvement would also need to work closely with teachers and curriculum in order to make participation relevant to classroom needs.

There are many examples of successful partnerships with the community already in place in the South Whidbey District and they encompass a variety of methods. The Red Wagon Reading Program with South Whidbey Kiwanis, the High School musical productions, the Maxwelton Outdoor Classroom, the Kiwanis Student of the Month recognitions, Rotary and other scholarships – all are examples of the ways community participation can happen.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Clearly, the Forum participants communicated a desire for more resources in the South Whidbey School District to coordinate and facilitate the use of available community assets to enhance student achievement.

The CE Team recommends that development of such resources involve leadership from the District and the School Board, working with the Community Engagement Team, and should be part of any District strategic planning.

The Team recommends the following **Action Plan** for validating this conclusion, learning more about the issues involved, and moving forward.

#### **1. Broaden the Process**

- Conduct a similar exercise in communication and information-gathering with the District’s professional staff (teachers and administrators) and integrate results with data from the Community Forum. Since only a small number of staff were involved in the Forum process, the Team feels it would be beneficial to elicit the same kind of data from the staff using a consistent technique developed by the CE Team in conjunction with administrators. What does staff see as barriers to community involvement? What is their experience with various partnership efforts? How does that correlate with the community’s suggestions?

## **2. Conduct Additional Research**

- Determine whether community participation has been shown to be effective in increasing student achievement in other school districts. If so, what policies and mechanisms are most effective for facilitating and administering volunteer participation?

- Determine what possibilities exist for increasing coordination and involvement in the 2006-07 school year. How might next year's South Whidbey AmeriCorps position be used to develop protocols and a database for a future District Resource Coordinator? How might the Community Engagement Center's web site be helpful in matching interest parents and community members with volunteer opportunities?

## **3. Develop an Implementation Plan**

- The CE Team would like to see steps 1 and 2 begun as early in the 2006-07 school year as possible, and completed in early spring 2007.

- Based on that information, an Implementation Plan would be developed identifying potential policies, activities, responsibilities, costs, and funding sources for achieving additional, meaningful community involvement with the goal of increasing student achievement in South Whidbey School District. The Plan would be presented to the School Board by May 1 (or the nearest appropriate Board meeting date).

## **4. Continue the Community Forum Process**

- The Community Engagement Team recommends continuing the Community Forum process and is ready to work with the District on identifying a topic for the 2007 Forum.

## **5. Renew the Community Engagement Team's Charge**

- The CE Team is willing and available to continue its work in order to assist with the process outlined. For greatest effectiveness, we recommend broadening our membership to include representatives from the elementary schools, student body, and business groups – all of which would ensure the range of diversity necessary for a viable plan to increase community involvement in the South Whidbey School District.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve our schools and our community.

### **Community Engagement Team**

Jamie Boyd, High School teacher

Chris Gibson, parent

Dave Haworth, South Whidbey Schools Foundation

Mike Johnson, High School principal

Shelley Marsanyi, parent

Rich Parker, School Board member

Helen Price Johnson, School Board member

Susie Richards, Learning & Community Engagement Program director

Nancy Waddell, community member