

# STUDENTS SPEAK ABOUT PARENT INVOLVEMENT AT NOE MIDDLE SCHOOL SUMMARY REPORT

With 1,200 students who speak at least 17 different native languages and participate in academic programs ranging from gifted and talented to special education, Noe Middle School is both the largest and most diverse middle grades community in Jefferson County. About half the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch subsidies, the federal government's measure of family poverty. Noe also attracts children from every zip code in the county, which gives the school a truly representative sample of Louisville's youth but also puts great distance between the school and some of its constituents.

One of the results of Noe's complex composition is inconsistent involvement and support from parents. The school tends to attract a high level of interest from parents whose children chose Noe because of its magnet or optional programs but limited attention from families who live within the school's attendance zones. Because the school population is evenly divided between those two groups, the number of people who are only marginally part of the Noe community is quite large.

Over the years, school leaders have tried different strategies for bridging the parent involvement gap, including conducting parent-teacher conferences in some of the public housing projects within Noe's assignment boundaries and combining informational sessions with student performances so parents would be more inclined to come to school.

Early in the 2001-2002 school year, Noe's Parent-Teacher-Student Association (PTSA) surveyed parents to find out why more weren't participating in traditional forms of school support, such as fundraisers and field trips. More than 250 parents returned the surveys. In general, they said they did not volunteer because of a lack of time, primarily because of conflicting work schedules. Some parents also said they were put off by the state's required criminal background check for all volunteers who work with children in schools.

### ***The importance of parent involvement***

Why all the concern about parent involvement? Research shows that when their parents are actively engaged in their education, children perform better in school. They get better grades, earn higher test scores, and feel more connected to the community. So in their continuing effort to improve achievement at Noe, school leaders quite naturally hope to capitalize on an important contributing factor.

When the opportunity to participate in the Students Speak project arose, Noe Principal Kathy Sayre signed the school up.

"I felt like this project would be an opportunity to find out what activities students were interested in and how we might get their parents involved," she said.

Sayre said the thrust of the Students Speak project – increasing parent involvement to help boost student achievement – is closely aligned with the goals of Noe's Consolidated Plan.

Students Speak helps schools identify concerns, gain new insights and make decisions that are more likely to benefit the children they are intended to help. Noe's Students Speak design team consisted of seven students -- representing most of the school's seventh- and eighth-grade teams -- two teachers, two parents, and one administrator. The group first met in September to learn about focus groups and to frame the research questions. Then, during several days in October, the students conducted the focus groups with their peers and, in early November, they discussed and summarized the results.

Noe's design team included:

Susie Bertram, 7 Challengers  
Shea Hennessy, 8 Rockets  
Brittany Lewis, 7 Challengers  
Michael Meaux, 8 Rockets  
Trey Trinnell, 8 Rockets  
Torrence Williams, 7 Achievers  
Amber Yocum, 8 Flyers  
Adriana Thornton-Clark, teacher, 7 Seekers  
Maddy Smith, teacher, 8 Rockets  
Judy Staples, assistant principal  
Holly Holland, parent, 8 Flyers  
Maria Trinnell, parent, 8 Rockets

### ***Pros and Cons***

One of the real benefits of this process was the leadership ability it tapped in the students serving on the design team. Although they all are bright, capable, and responsible students, they may not otherwise earn recognition in a large school with many academic "stars." The Students Speak project gave them an opportunity to complete important and meaningful work for which they were honored at home and at school – through their peers seeing them in leadership roles and through an article in the school newsletter. Their confidence with the adults and with each other grew with each gathering of the Students Speak group. As a result of their involvement in this process, these emerging student leaders may be more likely to participate in other school activities, which in turn might inspire their parents to become more engaged in their children's education.

Rona Roberts, the Students Speak facilitator from Roberts & Kay Inc., called the Noe and Westport Middle School students "pioneers" because they represent the largest group of adolescents ever to be involved on the research design teams. The process has been "much richer" because of their participation, she said.

One of the limitations of the Students Speak process at Noe had to do with the answers school leaders were seeking. Because of the selected topic – parent involvement – the student focus groups could at best provide only second-hand information about the reasons why parents from Noe's attendance zones do not routinely interact with the school. Children *might* know why their parents don't show up for school events. In some cases, they said, they specifically ask them not to attend. But only by going directly to

parents will school leaders know for sure why involvement is not consistent among different parent groups.

### ***The questions***

Members of Noe's design team, with guidance from Rona Roberts and feedback from Westport's design team, identified eight questions they wanted the research to address. Students in each focus group were asked:

1. On a prepared worksheet, to circle the activities that their parents, grandparents, or guardians had attended at Noe
2. To list the activities they would *like* their parents or guardians to attend
3. To imagine an activity they might like that Noe doesn't currently offer
4. If there are times when they don't want your parents at school, to describe those times
5. If there is a time when they really want their parents at school, how do they persuade them to come
6. What can they and other students do to persuade parents to attend more events at Noe
7. What can teachers do to get parents to attend events at Noe
8. To mention anything else not already discussed

The design team conducted six focus groups, four with all girls and two with all boys. The students who participated in the focus groups all live in Noe's attendance zones. Only seventh- and eighth-graders were selected because school leaders believed that sixth-graders were too new to the school community to be able to reflect deeply on the questions.

### ***The answers***

Rona Roberts, the Students Speak facilitator from Roberts & Kay Inc., said she found a lot of consistency in the responses from Noe's student focus groups, which gives her confidence in the information they shared. Roberts said that "many of the comments seem obvious, but that's okay" because they reflect students' sentiments about the school. In general, she said, the Noe students:

- Seemed to make clear distinctions between what they want their parents to see at school and what they don't. They want their parents to attend athletic and performance events – such as music or drama – but they usually do not want them to come to anything having to do with their grades in school or academic achievement. These comments might reflect the "look at me, don't look at me" stance of adolescents who are testing the limits of their independence. However, the comments also might reflect the lack of pride students take in their learning and/or the typically negative feedback they receive from teachers and parents about their school work.
- Believe that their parents need stronger reasons and incentives to come to school events. Students indicated that traditional events, such as Open House and the Fall Festival, have become routine; parents who might

have attended these events in the past don't see a reason to continue attending similar activities.

Research Question 1: *On a prepared worksheet, circle the activities that your parents, grandparents, or guardians have attended at Noe.*

The surveys students completed revealed that parents of neighborhood children fall into three groups: Those who come to almost everything at school to which they are invited; those who come only to formal functions, such as an Open House or scheduled conferences with teachers; and those who never come.

Among the boys, very few said their parents attend multiple school events, particularly involving some sort of academic performance. This may be because the boys do not consider themselves good students, those who are likely to earn a spot on academic teams or to receive recognition for their schoolwork.

Overall, the girls indicated greater involvement from their parents, especially for formal functions such as conference days and musical performances.

Research Question 2: *List the activities you would like your parents or guardians to attend at Noe.*

Girls and boys seem interested in having their parents attend some athletic and visual arts events in which they participate. Yet, they believe their involvement and their parents' interest in coming to school would be higher if there were more clubs, activities, and sports offered in the afternoon. Specifically, the girls would like to have football and volleyball teams, more school dances, more field trips, and additional opportunities to participate in cheerleading and track.

"I'd want my mom to come on field trips so I could have someone to talk to," one girl reflected. "I'd want her to come to the Fall Festival so we could have fun together."

Another girl said: "The reason why I want my parents to come" to Open House and band performances "is because of the support they give."

Another girl said she would like her parents to watch her perform cheerleading routines during basketball games "because I want them to see some of my talents I can do."

Boys were more reticent in responding to this question, but they indicated a preference for having their parents attend athletic events, chorus performances, and Stars Club. They would like to see additional sports teams at school, particularly basketball, baseball, wrestling, karate, and dodge ball.

One boy said he wanted his parents to attend athletic events because his participation would "make my parents proud of me that I'm getting out there."

Another boy, reflecting his ambivalence about having his parents at school, said: "I think both of my parents could attend baseball, football. And I don't want them to attend any fighting because like every time Mom sees me get whapped, she might say something like I'm grounded for fighting."

Research Question 3: *Imagine an activity you might like that Noe doesn't currently offer.*

Elaborating on their previously expressed interest in having more after-school athletic events at Noe, boys and girls suggested starting intramural sports leagues to give additional students a chance to compete. For students whose parents only come to school when they get in trouble with teachers or administrators, after-school sports leagues would give them a chance to gain new skills, work with a team, and earn positive attention for something they're "good at." In addition, boys believe their parents would be more inclined to come to school to watch them in athletic events.

"They have to see who scores touchdowns," one boy said, frankly.

Another boy said his parents would want to watch him play "because I'm real good at sports, whenever I play."

What would make it fun for parents or guardians to attend?

"I don't know," one boy answered, "I guess just spending time with them, letting them, like, see me more or something."

Boys perceive that Noe sanctions more activities for girls. Boys said they would like to have soccer, football, basketball, baseball, wrestling, and boxing squads.

For their part, girls said they would like to participate in non-tackle football, tennis, and volleyball.

"Why can't we have a place to play?" one girl asked. "All sports should be legal for both boys and girls. Football ain't have to be just no boys' sport."

One girl said she would be more involved in school if Noe had a volleyball team. "Because if they had it, then I'd want to join it because I want to be involved in sports but that's the only sport I like to play."

Like boys, girls believe their parents would enjoy coming to school to watch them in athletic events.

"To see that I was participating in something," one girl said.

Research Question 4: *If there are times when you don't want your parents at school, describe those times.*

Students said they most want to avoid opportunities for public embarrassment. The greatest possibility of embarrassment, they sense, occurs in relation to academic events, such as "when I have low grades on my report card," one girl said.

Or during parent teacher conferences: "Because they find out stuff like your behavior. Because it don't really show that good on your report card. They find out why you having trouble in class and stuff."

"Well, when I want them to come there, is whenever I do something good and I want to show them that I did it," another girl explained. "When I don't want them there is when I did something or didn't do something and I don't want them to know it."

"She asks too many questions," one girl said about her mother.

Another girl said pointedly: "I don't want them at school. I don't want to get in trouble."

Boys seek to avoid the parental limelight during embarrassing moments, "like when I get my report card, I don't want my parents to see that." But in addition, they expressed concern about having their parents at school dances and field trips or any other time when they can check up on their interactions with friends.

“Like, when I ask out a girl, they always like, ‘She ain’t good enough for you,’” one boy said.

“I know, man,” one of his peers said supportively. “I don’t want them to embarrass me.”

And one boy said flatly: “I never want my parents to come to school.”

During one insightful interchange, a group of boys explained that, “It’s not fun when you have a parent bugging you. When there’s nobody to watch over you, you stop. You’ve got to make the right decisions. If a parent’s there, they’re always over your back, warning you.”

“Cause they always embarrass you somehow.”

“I know, because they’re always like, ‘Come here, hee, hee. He’s so pretty.’”

“Treat you like you’re two years old.”

“Here, brush your teeth. Your teeth are yellow.”

“Comb your hair. Put on your nice clothes.’ It’s like one nag after another.”

In addition to academic and social activities, boys do not want their parents to attend sporting events in which they do not excel. Again, this might reflect how unsuccessful these students feel in all aspects of their school life.

“You don’t want them to come and see you running and looking bad,” one boy said plaintively.

Another boy mimicked the likely response from his parents: “Oh, my son screwed up!”

Boys also perceive their parents’ public displays of support, however well intended, as demeaning if it calls attention to them individually and not as part of a team or group.

“I mean sometimes, if I was in a game and my parents come, they’d go, like, ‘Go you can do it! You can do it!’ And then you’d be humiliated in front of all of your friends.”

Research Question 5: *If there is a time when you really want your parents at school, how do you persuade them to come?*

When students really want their parents to come to school, they use different ways to persuade them.

“If I wanted my parents to come, I would say I would be the best kid ever,” one boy said.

Another boy, offering the flip side of the comments in Question 4 about only receiving negative attention in school, said he would “let my mom see that I’m actually in some activity instead of sitting home all day. And watching me have fun, too. She likes it when I am enjoying myself.”

“I know,” another student chimed in, “because when you want them to come, you’re like doing an activity that is fun for you. But when you don’t want them to come, you’re either in trouble or your report card’s coming out.”

Added another boy: “The only time I want my Mama to come is like when, either I have some kind of activity that I’m really good in, like art or singing or something like

that. Or when I'm going to Bowling Green because I'm in chorus and we're supposed to be going there for some singing."

Students suggested offering incentives, such as free food or prizes, to parents who attend school events.

"I would exaggerate," one boy said. "I would tell her that she'd get a thousand bucks if she'd come. Something like that."

"My parents wouldn't fall for a thousand bucks," responded another boy.

"Yeah," echoed another. "They're not that stupid."

"Tell them you're getting an award," suggested one boy.

Several students said their parents aren't able to come to school because of work conflicts, including having to work multiple jobs to keep the family afloat financially.

"My parents are barely home, so you know, they can't come," one boy said.

Comments from girls followed the same lines. Asked what strategies they could use to encourage more participation from their parents, one girl said, "I would say something like, 'If they didn't come, I'd never speak to them again.'"

"Yeah," another girl agreed. "Like, I would go in my room, slam the door and start crying."

One girl said her mother would respond to financial incentives. "Just tell them and see if she could get a day off from work. Ask her if she could get like, one of her days off when she gets paid and see if she can come then."

Another girl was somewhat fatalistic about the chances of involving more parents in school. "Everybody can't be there when you want them to be," she said. "If my mother comes, she comes. And if she doesn't, she's a very busy woman."

Research Question 6: What can you and other students do to persuade your parents to attend more events at Noe?

Asked to think collectively about what students could do to encourage parents to play a more active role in their education, the focus groups said they don't believe there is much interesting to share about school.

"I have no clue on that," one boy said honestly.

A girl noted darkly: "My mom doesn't have time for anything like that. She just sends me here."

Students also said their parents are suspicious when teachers try to get too chummy, particularly when their attitudes contrast with the way their children have described them.

"My mom told me to tell all the people to stop being real nice," one boy said. "Because you know how like your mom comes in and all the teachers are nice and stuff? And then when they're not there, they're all mean."

Some students said they would like to see representative students change roles with teachers for the day. "For one day the kids are the teachers and the teachers are the kids," a boy said, adding a pronoun reference that wasn't entirely clear. "They don't know how bad they're being."

The only specific advice they could offer had to do with strengthening friendships – for students and parents – which would help adults feel connected to the school.

“Like if your best friend, if he says his mom’s coming (to a school event), and you want your mom to meet his,” one boy suggested.

Another boy agreed: “So they’ll talk and then they’ll be friends and stuff. So they both come and then they talk.”

Staggered schedules might help parents working evening shifts, some students suggested.

“Probably one way I can get my parents to come is if they ever switched around their work hours,” one boy said.

Research Question 7: What can teachers do to get parents to attend events at Noe?

Could teachers do anything to prompt greater involvement from parents? Students encouraged their teachers to emphasize their positive interactions and accomplishments in school, not just their negative behaviors.

“They could tell good stuff about you,” one boy said, in a very telling remark.

“Send postcards home,” suggested one girl. “Because I’m telling you now, if they give me a piece of paper talking about these events at Noe Middle School and blah, blah happening this day, my parents will not find out because I lose everything they give me.”

“They need to call our parents, or get hold of them by e-mail or something,” suggested another girl.

Students encouraged school leaders to stress novelty with events and to refine traditional school activities.

“Open House, Oh God, that’s really boring,” a girl said. “No one shows up. We don’t want to do nothing at Open House but explore the building.”

“If they don’t do nothing funner for Open House, then I don’t think we should have an Open House.”

“The Fall Festival is getting boring,” one boy said. “They need to add more games and stuff. And another thing. The basketball games. My Mama ain’t going to come to my basketball game in that gym. When we be having a home game, that gym be so little. We only got two sets of bleachers. And all the kids mostly be on the bleachers. So, they don’t have no room for the parents.”

“They need to add more exciting stuff for these people, our parents, to come,” one girl stated emphatically.

“My Mama be coming if there be some free food,” another girl chimed in.

“Some escargot or something,” one girl said, then added for those who might not know what it meant: “Snail.”

The conversation shifted to strategies Noe could use to improve the school’s “entertainment” value.

“We could have a parent party,” one girl suggested.

Let parents dress up in Halloween costumes, another student recommended.

Others students said the school should display more art and projects in which they’ve excelled by creating more bulletin boards and glass display cases. These efforts to demonstrate multiple forms of educational achievement would give their parents more visual cues about what they are learning in school.

As one girl said: “We never actually show off everything, you know?”

Research Question 8: *Mention anything else not already discussed.*

Given the chance to stress anything not already covered in the conversations, the students repeated their desire to have more sports and after-school activities that would provide additional ways for them and their parents to feel connected to Noe. They stressed the need for better facilities for spectator sports. And they said they wish their teachers communicated more regularly and positively with their parents.

Finally, in an extremely encouraging comment, one boy said about the focus group session, “This is the best hour I’ve ever spent in school.”

***Final reflections***

Clearly, middle school students are moving out of the stage when they automatically enjoy all forms of attention from their parents. They rebuff adults’ attempts to “fuss” over them indiscriminately. At the same time, they are hungry for positive attention from a distance. Having their parents in the audience when they excel at school activities is important to them, but they often prefer more private expressions of support for their achievements. School leaders can help parents understand the growing independence of their children and the helpful ways in which they can support their education.

Many students in the focus groups seem to believe that a parent in the school building can mean only one thing – trouble. It is disheartening, but perhaps not surprising, to discover that they do not view parent participation in a positive light. If school leaders want to use parent involvement to help boost the achievement of struggling students at Noe, they must give parents other ways to connect to the school than responding to their children’s low grades and bad conduct.

School leaders should consider planning events in which many students – not just a few -- have an opportunity to shine. The focus group responses indicate that students want and need more ways to be recognized at Noe. For students who are not strong academically, sports and other extracurricular activities can help them feel connected to the school and motivate them to do better in class. And, as they indicated, their parents would be more likely to come to school if they knew that their children would be performing.

When parents are not accustomed to coming to school, and when they are uncomfortable about doing so, they may need more creative outreach efforts from educators. Noe may have to invest significant energy – beyond just sending out invitations – to overcome the reluctance of some parents to show up for school events. Students in the focus group were explicit that their parents need to see something appealing or promising, on their own terms, to venture into the school building. Food, fun activities, and financial incentives were suggested ways to make uninvolved parents feel welcome at Noe. Although these initiatives may increase the staff’s work load initially, they could help reduce the faculty’s responsibilities over time. For, when parents and their children have regular opportunities to interact positively with educators, they will be more willing to work with them to solve academic problems.

The students' comments also reveal that adolescents are important conduits of information about school. They were very clear about what they want to share with their families, and if they only experience school in negative ways, they will communicate those same impressions to their parents. If school leaders want to engage the entire family, they must improve the flow of information in the educational triangle – school, child, and parent. Each of the players should have access to the same information and have faith in the school's policies and practices so they can work together, not against each other.

Finally, school leaders must be careful not to assume that uninvolved parents care less about their children's education than the parents of high achievers. The indifference or disinterest some parents express may stem from their own poor experiences with the schools of their youth. Struggling students often have parents who struggled themselves in school. They may not have learned how to interact well as children, much less as parents. Moreover, it is human nature to avoid conflicts. Parents who do not consider school a welcoming place where every child can succeed will not willingly participate in the life of the school – no matter how many cash prizes or escargot Noe offers as incentives.