PUTNAM COUNTY SCHOOLS

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Report on the
Community Conversation

May 13, 2006

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Study Circle Resource Center

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Community Conversations Report

On Saturday May 13th, in spite of busy end of school year schedules, a broad mix of community residents joined for the first formal Putnam County Conversation. Participants met in small conversation groups with neutral volunteer facilitators from Putnam County and from the Georgia School Boards Association. From 9 a.m. until 2:30 p.m. the participants listened to short presentations of data and strategic information and then offered their own ideas and viewpoints. The major themes that emerged are offered in this report. Also available are the actual responses taken from the easel pads of each of the groups.

What was the format for the Community Conversation?

Participants were divided into table conversation groups. Each of the groups had a volunteer facilitator who agreed to help keep the group focused, make sure every person had a fair opportunity to be heard and ensure that what was said was fairly heard and written down. At the end of the day all of the notes were collected and, with wonderful help from the Georgia School Boards Association, typed up in one document.

The Study Circle Resource Center combined the notes from all of the groups, grouped the responses into common themes and looked for the viewpoints, questions and suggestions most useful for thinking about the future of the Putnam County Schools.

The report is not intended to be a vote but rather a collection of the best thinking possible in one day packed with information and important conversation. The report provides feedback to the Board of Education as it considers the important decisions it needs to make and it provides a basis for deciding which issues are most important to the community. Future school and community meetings will draw on these same results.

Participants worked from an agenda that is attached to this report. The discussion started with important values adopted by the Board of Education and critical goals that has as its number one goal high levels of performance for all students in Putnam County. The conversation specifically addresses the importance of actively engaging parents and the broader community in the educational process.

Shared Values
Honesty, Fairness, Respect, Responsibility, Compassion

The Results of the Community Conversation

Reasons to be Proud and Assets to Build On

The groups first considered the assets and strengths of the Putnam County schools. These are the things that provide hope for the future education of children in the County. Leading the list were the human assets followed by other physical and educational assets. These assets (based on the number of times they were mentioned) include:

- *Teachers.* At the top of the list were the teachers and included compassion, the quality of instruction, the percentage of advanced degrees and their support of community values.
- *Administration.* Mentioned were having clear goals, the ability to work on community concerns and (mentioned in several different ways) the willingness to listen to and work with the community.
- *Classes and Programs.* Pride in the FFA program and its recent award was a part of a list that included other after school activities, tutoring and the ways students have excelled in a variety of ways.
- *Community Support.* As evidenced by the support for the Community Conversation, community involvement was mentioned including the support for the schools from a diverse cross-section of the County and partnerships with post-secondary schools.
- *Physical Resources.* The importance of a good financial base and tax digest were mentioned along with food services and buildings like the attractive elementary school.

Challenges to Face

The participants generated 102 ideas about the challenges facing the schools. When combined, these fell into fewer than 10 pools of similar items. Each of the groups circled the items where they had the greatest energy and agreement. The number indicates how many of these were circled by the groups.

- **Parental Apathy and Involvement (5).** No group received more mentions. Participant's ideas ranged from "demanding" parental participation to finding creative ways to encourage involvement.

- **Student Achievement and Behavior (5).** Increasing achievement and graduation rates was joined by concerns about student apathy and need for discipline in ways that encouraged students.
- **Growth and Change (4).** Groups mentioned the effects of growth on facilities, staff and resources and also the changing demographics of the community. That diversity includes growth around the lake and also growth of the Hispanic community and of others with limited English background, which will require new approaches.
- **Money and Marketing (3).** The school system will need more money, smarter use of its money and the capacity to market the system so that it is more visible and receives greater support.
- **Teacher Recruitment and Retention (2).** The system needs to focus on retaining teachers and on recruiting and hiring specialized teachers (and administrators).
- **Community Involvement (2).** Focus on overcoming community apathy and find ways for greater involvement.

How We Hope to Grow: What Do We Want to Keep as We Grow?

Two separate questions dealt with similar themes that address the questions, "What do we want our schools to do? What do we want our schools to be?" The results echo ideas and themes of ideas already mentioned. These reflect the issues important to the participants. All of the responses were placed into groups of similar ideas and viewpoints. They are not in a particular order.

- **Student Results.** A clear theme was the importance of high expectations and high graduation rates. Major themes included the need for flexible programming that can adapt to the needs of students from very different backgrounds and with different learning styles. The goal was to **challenge students no matter their academic level** by starting them early with reading and reasoning.
- **Student Roles.** Several of the responses (reflected in other parts of the conversation) underscored the importance of creatively involving students in the success of the schools. Examples included using students (with proper supervision) as mentors and facilitators.
- **Parental Involvement.** The strong theme of parental involvement appeared throughout the document. In considering future growth, a common issue or concern was how future changes in school size, configuration and location would likely affect parental involvement.
- **Teacher Impact.** As mentioned under the challenges, participants talked about high standards for teachers, continued learning for teachers and one mention of giving teachers greater authority for discipline.
- **Diverse Students and Diverse Learning Needs.** "One size does not fit all" and at the same time it was important that students not be divided. In this viewpoint flexible learning opportunities and new approaches were encouraged. The importance of not dividing the community or resegregating schools was included.
- **College and Career Focus.** Among the assets mentioned were programs that connect high school students to colleges and universities. The question is, "How do we help students move beyond secondary

education whether that means into college or into more technical training for the future?"

- **Transportation.** The two most important transportation themes were limiting the time students are on buses and decreasing or limiting the growth of traffic as much as possible.
- **Safety and Discipline.** Through manageable school and class sizes, student mentoring and support, high expectations and community support, participants expect safety and discipline.

How We Hope to Grow: Centralized or De-centralized Growth?

The groups listened to presentations of the issues affecting future growth. A presentation about changing demographics and a presentation about the challenges around elementary and high school expansion and construction preceded the conversation. The groups considered the pros and cons for each type of growth. Ironically, almost the same number of pros and cons were recorded for each of the alternatives[1]. The numbers indicate the times a particular issue was mentioned.

	Pros	Cons
Centralized Growth	(9) Community Unity. No district lines, no division of communities, less competition between communities. (9) Economy of building and maintaining schools. Economy of scale and less infrastructure. (4) Greater concentration of help and resources. (2) No one would have more than a 25- minute drive. (2) Equal accessibility and equal levels of educational opportunity. Additional ideas included better sports teams and lack of need to predict areas of growth.	(7) Increased traffic congestion. (7) Increased need for transportation. (6) Too impersonal in a larger school (3) Land availability for a larger development. Additional ideas included less community involvement, increased discipline problems, a need to condemn property and too many age levels on school buses.
Decentralized Growth	(9) Local community involvement. Increased identification, more after school involvement and greater community access. (6) Less busing and travel time. (5) Smaller schools. (5) Greater attention for students. Additional ideas included less traffic, greater security and healthy competition.	(8) Greater duplication and cost. (6) Greater segregation by race or income. (3) Unhealthy competition. Additional ideas included more busing, districting battles and resources spread too thinly.

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[1] The pros included 29-30 total entries and the cons included 24-25 total entries.

How We Hope to Grow: Elementary or High School First?

The groups considered which should be built next, a high school or another elementary school.

Reasons for Building the Elementary Next:

The strongest sentiments for the elementary construction were to meet the needs for increased capacity.

- Meets current need for capacity.
    - Eases pressure on media center and cafeteria
- Shortens the bus rides.
- Creates a neighborhood school
- Greater impact on student achievement.

Reasons for Building the High School Next:

The strongest sentiments for the high school were to take advantage of the money that is currently available and to use increased available space to meet some of the elementary capacity pressure.

- Take advantage of money now available only for the high school.
- Allows current high school space to be reconfigured for other grade combinations or programs.
- Ease capacity issues at elementary with space made available.

Suggestions for Configuration of Grades:

1. Build a new high school and break elementary into K-2 and 3-5.
2. Pre-K – 3 at current location, 4-6 at current middle, 7-9 at old high school and 10-12 at a new high school near the center of the county.

How can we best keep the community engaged? What Issues are most strategic for community consideration next?

The Board Chair and the Superintendent both emphasized the importance of an ongoing open relationship with the community. The final conversation of the morning asked the groups to consider how best to inform the community about progress and to keep the community engaged.

The recommendations can be broken out into several types of work. (Some of the ideas may be in place, but their importance might be underscored here or the need to make the information more widely known.)

1. What can one person do?
   - Support school clubs and groups like the Boys and Girls Clubs, 4-H and others.
   - Volunteer for school projects.
   - Serve as a mentor.
   - Spread the word about the needs of the schools and about good things happening in the schools. Be community ambassadors.

2. How do we keep the community informed?
   - Continue the development of a community-focused web site with calendars.
   - Post results from Board meetings.
   - Create a quarterly report and update for the community. Include a Hispanic translation.
   - Distribute information and do presentations at churches and other places of worship.
   - Improve meeting announcements and agenda information.
   - Ensure that someone is getting out the important messages for the school system. Use the radio as well as the print media.

3. How do we effectively engage the community?
   - Continue community conversations
     o Hold sessions in smaller groups near the communities.
     o Hold several conversations a year.
     o Provide childcare for the conversations.
     o Hold a broad community-wide conversation and possibly smaller sessions for the most interested core group.
   - Use opinion surveys published in the paper.
   - Provide opportunities for public comment at the board meetings.
   - Reinstate an event that includes parents and students.

Community Conversations Agenda

8:15 a.m.   Registration/Continental Breakfast

9:00 a.m.   Welcome
- Why the Board wants to engage the community and why this is an important start.
- Plan for the Day and Operating Agreements

9:15 a.m.   Group Session
- "How have schools affected our lives and how do they affect our communities? What do we want for current and future students?"
- Think back to when you were in school; how was your family involved in your education? What was the relationship between your family, your teachers and other school personnel? (If you are a student, talk about what these things are like now.)

9:30 a.m.   Group Session
- What were the things you value about your own education that you value now and want to make sure are available for today's students? Students, what have you experienced that you want for future students? What did you miss that you don't want students now and in the future to miss?

10:00 a.m. Information Session
- Overview of strategic developments.

10:15 a.m. Group Session
- "When you think about your schools in Putnam County, what makes you the most proud? "   (This is a brainstorm. People share quick responses. It can be buildings, people, quality of classes, friends . . . anything that makes them proud.)

10:25 a.m.   Group Session
- "When you think about the Putnam County School System, what other issues or challenges do you see?"
- "What are the issues that need to be on the agenda for future community conversations?
- Look over the values of the school system. Which of the values are of particular importance now? What issues to they suggest?
- What are the most important challenges? Circle the top three in your group?"

10:50 a.m.   **Break**

11:05 a.m. Information-Session
- County and Community Demographics
- Presentation of the most significant "headlines" to help people talk effectively with each other.

11:20 a.m.   Information -Growth and Program Needs

11:40 a.m.   Group Session
- What issues need to be considered by the board in deciding on school size and location? Does the community want to move in the direction of a large "economy of scale" model, or a smaller "neighborhood" school concept? What do these models bring to mind for you?
- Where do you think a new school ought to be located – in a centralized part of the county or simply where the growth is?
- What impact would each decision have on the county in the future – in terms of sense of community, academics and other costs? At what point is the enrollment size considered a good fit for a school?
- Where is the growth in the county? Where are students and families living now vs. 10 years from now?
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12:00 noon   **Lunch**

12:45 p.m.   Group Session
- Are there other factors the board needs to consider in addressing growth and program needs such as grade configuration, or magnet or theme schools?
  Current grade configurations are:
  - Putnam County Elementary School (K-5)
  - Putnam County Middle School (6-8)
  - Putnam County High School (9-12)

  Potential grade configurations might be:
  - Primary School (K-2)
  - Elementary School (K-5)
  - Elementary School (K-8)
  - Middle School (6-8)
  - Junior High (8-9)
  - Sr. High (10-12)
  - High School (9-12)
- What are some of the needs of our students in considering theme schools, magnet school or technical schools?

1:25 p.m.   Group Session
- When you think about all we have discussed, how can we make a difference? What actions can people take on their own to address the challenges facing the system?

1:37 p.m.   Group Session
- What could small groups and organizations in the school and the community do?

1:49 p.m.   Group Session
- What can the school system do? What kind of future conversations should we have? How do we increase the number of participants?

2:01 p.m.   Wrap-up Session: Important Next Steps

2:21 – 2:30 p.m.   **Concluding Remarks**