

July 20, 2011

Meeting to discuss the ISP program evaluation process

159 Thorndike Street, Cambridge

Attendees: Superintendent Jeff Young; Deputy Superintendent Carolyn Turk; School Committee Members: Marc McGovern, Patty Nolan, Nancy Tauber, Alice Turkel; Parents: approx 30-35, including Trish Marti, Bill Bogstad, Lenore Cowen, Freedom Baird, Joanne Niklas, [need the other names]

Notes taken by Freedom Baird, freedom.baird@gmail.com , corrections welcome

JY:

- I'll give an update on the evaluation of the ISP program
- I'll talk about opportunities for focus group survey / ways parent voices will be included.
- We met on Jan 19th and had a similar kind of conversation. Themes from that day:
 - When kids go into the ISP, they take their academic work more seriously; they have a kind of seriousness of purpose
 - People thought the way the ISP is constructed approximates a middle school or upper school – a 3 year experience; a favorable aspect
 - People appreciated the project-oriented or project-based approach, kids have the time and ability to take topics & subjects in depth; opportunity for cross-disciplinary learning; they can “run with their learning”
 - Quote from a student: “It’s cool to be smart in the ISP”
 - Culture around the ISP feeds a sense of purposefulness
 - Another child described it as, to paraphrase “This is what school is supposed to be like”
 - Our expectations are high, realistic, achievable
 - Cohorts of like-minded students; kids support one another in creating that culture
- I was anticipating no changes to the ISP for the 2011-2012 school year
- I promised to retain the services of an outside consultant to evaluate the program
- Had trouble finding an evaluator. But have since retained a firm, Nancy Brigham Associates, which has begun the work.

Parent: Is there recognition in the administration that there are children who are not being challenged?

JY: Yes, both in and not in the ISP program

Parent: What’s the intent of the third-party evaluation?

Parent: Parents took away that the evaluation would take place during the school year. But it actually took place at the end of the school year. Some 8th graders weren’t even there. We were told you would contact us when this evaluation started. I wasn’t notified, except via listserves and my 6th grader.

JY: About the calendar piece: Yes, we wanted to try in the spring to get going. We realized June is not the best time. There is some additional work to be done in the fall in terms of: outreach, interview, data collection.

JY: It was an oversight to not inform people.

Parent: I feel like we're a little bit shut out. They're going to be writing the evaluation document in August.

JY: What's the best we can do now going forward? I missed that moment, I regret it.

CT: In response to what this group [of parents] can contribute, Nancy Brigham is the lead person. She is very receptive to ongoing input. She can be contacted by email, snailmail, and SurveyMonkey survey. So, if there are still ideas, concerns, she is receptive.

Parent: This is the first I'm hearing of her [Nancy Brigham]. Please circulate her contact info.

Parent: The survey was inadequate.

JY: If we need to extend the time in September, we'll do that, not brush through it. We'll find a way to make sure that all ISP parents have a way to have input.

Parent: And non-ISP parents too. Some parents not in the ISP would have considered it.

Parent: What is the goal of this evaluation? Can we be let in on what you're thinking? There's lots of data about ISP. The program goes back 30+ years.

CT: Using an outside evaluator gives a fresh pair of eyes, to give feedback, re: strengths & weaknesses, re: student outcomes, teacher efficacy. What is the program we're offering students? How is it effective? Will we need to replicate it? Or not?

Parent: How are you measuring? What rubrics are you using? In the survey, why didn't you include the question about why parents are choosing the ISP? Look at all the parents here.

JY: Families select ISP because of: higher expectations, greater academic challenge, environment where kids are purposeful. Am I missing something?

Parent: Classroom behavior

JY: In some non-ISP classrooms there are distractions, consequently behavior is worse.

Parent: ISP is an *experience*.

JY: The atmosphere is a condition for learning.

Parent: It's an alternative that keeps parents in the school system.

Parent: You need to extend the survey questions to families of younger kids.

JY: Is ISP an end? Or a means to an end? Is the real end that the ISP is a known "technology", and is used to achieve academic excellence, etc.?

JY: I have to think about 6,000 kids. Not just the ones in the ISP.

Lenore: There's going to come a point where the interests and needs of *all* the kids can't all be met with one type of program. Providing an ISP is an *equity* issue.

JY: Shouldn't that academic challenge be provided to every kid?

Lenore: If my kid wants to read Plato in 8th grade, that's not going to be appropriate for every 8th grader, and would even be cruel for some.

Lenore: Maybe there's nothing for my bright student at the CPS.

JY: I do want to serve *all* children and meet all their needs.

Parent: All students are not alike, and are not going to function at the same level. I come from NYC, where we had ESP and SP [an ISP type of program]. In all of the schools, children have to be put in classes that are at their level. And if they excel, they need to have a class they can move up into. Talk to parents *and* students with a survey.

Joanne: [responding to JY's "Am I missing something?" question]. I feel like we're playing a game, like if we don't know the answer... I don't think that's a helpful approach. The issue is: how do we take care of all the students? It's not going to be solved by a trade-off. That we have to sacrifice challenge for the brightest students in order to help the kids who are struggling the most.

JY: I don't see it as a trade-off. As for the tennis-match thing, I apologize.

Parent: Incorporate all the good things that are working in the ISP into general education. Only *after* you've done that *then* can you remove the ISP. We are going to lose children in the middle grades, because parents take them out, because they are not challenged.

JY: Let's say we took 150 kids at random (rather than the self-selecting 150 kids of the ISP). If we put them in the same program, do you think they would excel?

JY: So, it's not the ISP that's making the difference, it's the *kids*? Is that your point?

JY: It comes back to the question of *ability grouping*.

Parent: There's one more piece: the desire, the motivation, the behavior. When lexiling the kids, and talking about ability grouping, it's not just academic ability, there's an "x-factor".

JY: Do you think it's possible to challenge 6,000 students without grouping them by ability? Can we find a way to challenge all the students without grouping by ability? If we provided all the necessary resources? Who believes that's possible?

3 parents raise their hands

Parent: Maybe it's possible with enough resources.

Freedom: Look at a sports analogy. Let's say all the 6th graders are playing soccer. You want every kid to be challenged and improve their skills. From the kid in the wheel chair to the strongest player. What are you going to do for the strongest players? How are you going to push them to improve?

JY: ...what can you do for the average soccer player?

Parent: You put us on the defensive when you say "What can you do for the average soccer player?"

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Parent: Parents need to be *included* in the design of the evaluation process.

Parent: Why can't we partner with Nancy Brigham? Why can't we get together with her?

Parent: It sounds like your main concern is how ISP kids effect other kids.

CT: Hold another well-advertised meeting with Nancy in the fall.

Parent: Add a question to the survey: "What's the non-economic ramification of the ISP?"

Parent: We're in the ISP because there's no other choice, not because it's the best. No one is asking how the ISP can be *improved*.

Parent [to JY]: There's an inability here to ground the conversation in reality. What's our desired end result? A specific, tangible result.

Lenore: Let's not pit some Cambridge students against others. Instead, let's find another town, another district with a really good track record. Let's aspire for all our kids to be at least as good as at town "N". Everybody does better than the kids in Newton.

Parent: We have to have classes that meet the needs of our students.

CT: It's the diversity of perspective in this room that will make the district stronger. Be the best we can be as a Cambridge community.

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