

PITTSFIELD LISTENS: STRONG SCHOOLS, STRONG COMMUNITY:

How can all of us make Pittsfield a great place for everyone to learn and live?

Summary Report 2011

Background to Strong Schools, Strong Community¹

In December of 2010, the Pittsfield School District received a one-year planning grant from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation to support the transformation of our middle high school from a traditional school to a student-centered learning environment. The School District has recognized that the Pittsfield Schools, particularly the Middle High School, need to improve learning outcomes for all students, increase graduation and college-attendance rates, and create a student-centered learning environment that is motivating, engaging, and responsive to the individual needs of each student. Pittsfield is the only community in New Hampshire to receive one of these highly competitive grants.

Since the grant was awarded, the Community Advisory Council - which includes many community members and community educators who have volunteered their time - has been developing a multi-year plan for this transformation. The Council has been researching effective educational practices and visiting successful, break-the-mold schools to learn how to better serve our students and community.

An important component of the planning process is to involve as many Pittsfield residents as possible in assessing the current state of the schools and creating concrete recommendations for improvement over the next several years. To meet this goal, the School District formed a collaborative relationship with the Pittsfield Youth Workshop to design a process for engaging town residents in focused conversations about the schools and community. In turn, PYW is partnering with NH Listens (part of the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire, www.nhlistens.org) to support community-wide small group dialogues. The first rounds of those community conversations occurred in August and September, 2011. This report summarizes the findings and recommendations that resulted from those conversations.

Planning and Framing the Community Conversations

To begin the project, we brought together a small planning group in July to help frame the key questions to be addressed and identify some of the primary issues that were likely to come up in the conversations. This group included the staff and board leadership of PYW, members of the Community Advisory Council, school employees, parents, and community leaders. The group discussed perceptions of the community and its schools, past efforts at school improvement, and ways to strengthen the school and community in the future. In order to capture the importance of the relationship between Pittsfield and its schools, the group decided that the most appropriate framing for the small group dialogues that would be taking place in August should be: *Strong Schools—Strong Community; How can all of us make Pittsfield a great place for everyone to learn and live?*

¹ This background material is adapted from Superintendent Freeman's "School Transformation Update" posted June 2, 2011 on the Pittsfield School District website (<http://pittsfield-nh.com/sau/1395#more-1395>).

The planning group also discussed the most effective way to engage as many people as possible in the community conversations, including ways to recruit residents who often don't participate in public forums or school-related events. In order to provide input to the schools in time to be included in the next major funding proposal to the Nellie Mae Foundation, it was decided that a three-week series of small group facilitated dialogues beginning in early August would be the most effective approach.

During the remainder of July, PYW and the planning group recruited facilitators and participants, using a variety of strategies. High school students worked with PYW to design fliers to promote the community conversations and attended Pittsfield Old Home Day and National Night Out to distribute the fliers and encourage residents to sign up for the conversations. PYW reached out to particular groups in the community to encourage participation, including senior citizens, current high school students and recent graduates, parents who have participated in PYW programs in the past, homeschool parents, community leaders and community members who are not generally involved in the school. Phone calls were made to individual residents, announcements and articles were published in the *Suncook Valley Sun*, and notices were posted on the PYW and Pittsfield School District web site.

These efforts resulted in registration of over 60 participants, representing a diverse range of ages, occupations, length of residency in Pittsfield, and experience with the schools (as those with children in the schools and those without signed up).

The Kick-Off

The community conversations began with a public kick-off, held on the evening of July 28, 2011 at the Pittsfield Fire Station. About 30 of those planning to participate in the three-week series of conversations attended, as well as a number of residents who had not signed up previously. The kick-off was also attended by the School Board and school leadership as well as representatives of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. A total of about 50 residents participated in the kick-off. A combination of whole group and small group exercises were used to answer a set of four questions, listed below with the most common themes reported under each one. Words in **bold** were used the most often.

❖ *What words would I use to describe Pittsfield schools today?*

small **limited** **dedicated**
changing caring improving
supportive needs improvement
lack of communication between parents and teachers

❖ *What words would I use to describe the Pittsfield community today?*

supportive friendly **small**
close active **caring**

taxed **struggling** **poor**
shrinking dedicated

❖ *What words would I want to use to describe Pittsfield schools in five years?*

successful teachers stay **achieving**
proud **student centered**
thriving innovative individualized
strong communicative
innovative model for other schools
100% of graduates all knowing their next steps

❖ *What words would I want to use to describe the Pittsfield community in five years?*

Active **positive** **clean**
Home **growing** close knit
Lively safe **proud**
Connected united welcoming
Strong **friendly**

Overall, the themes that emerged from the Kick-Off focused on the size and demographic characteristics of the schools and community now (**small, struggling, poor, changing**), the community's sense of itself and its schools now (**supportive, dedicated, caring**), and its aspirations for the future of the schools and community (**proud, achieving, student centered, active, positive, clean, friendly**). Pittsfield is a community that is concerned about its present while being able to identify its core strengths, and capable of imagining a future in which there is great pride in its schools and their accomplishments.

Who Participated in the Community Conversations?

During August, five facilitated groups of 8-12 people met over a period of three weeks for two hours each week to address the framing questions. In addition, four separate focus groups were held - one at the Senior Center, two separate groups were conducted with current middle and high school students and recent graduates, and another group with teachers and school staff. A total of 113 community members participated in these conversations.

What Did People Talk About?

The most common topics (and sub-themes) across all of the small-group conversations focused on:

- communication
 - especially between parents and teachers, and between the school leadership and the community
 - within the schools as well as between the schools and community
 - using a variety of media
- collaboration and cooperation
 - involvement of the community at large and parents in school matters
- accountability
 - holding high expectations for student achievement
- student-centered learning
 - assuring that every student believe he or she can succeed
- the curriculum
 - expanded use of technology for teaching and communication
 - the need for more electives, especially in music and art as well as AP courses
- pride in the schools and community
- discipline and clear expectations for behavior
- transitions of students at grades K-1, 6-7, 8-9, and at graduation
- the morale of administrators, teachers, students, and parents

In the third session of each small group (and in the one-time focus groups), participants developed specific recommendations for action. A summary of each group's recommendations follows:

GROUP ONE:

- Communication
 - Use multiple forms of communication between the school and community, including newspapers, newsletters from the school, community bulletin boards, a teacher web page, automated e-mail and phone communications, Facebook, Power School, etc.
 - Conduct a survey of residents to determine the most effective, preferred forms of communication
- Collaboration/communication
 - Create a task force to address collaboration and communication shortcomings and make suggestions for improvement
 - Increase partnerships with community organizations, including through the use of school venues for community partners

- Increase opportunities for vocational training through partnerships
- Accountability
 - Expand the learning contract to include behavior and learning
 - Respond within 24-48 hours to communications (both parents and schools)
 - Rethink tenure policies and increase evaluations of both teachers and students
- Student-centered learning
 - Offer more flexible scheduling
 - Seek flexible learning through “reverse ELO” and use of the “Seven Intelligences” model
 - Revisit graduation requirements to include life skills and job skills

GROUP TWO:

- Communication and teacher-parent involvement
 - The school district will be proactive in communicating useful, effective, and sufficient information to the community in a timely manner.
- Pride in School and Community
 - Pittsfield will be a town where the students and the community are proud to belong and call their home.
- Discipline and Clear Expectations
 - Develop a fair discipline system that will be applied in a consistent manner and include age appropriate expectations and consequences – while maintaining the safety of the students.
- Transitions
 - Pittsfield students will be better prepared for all transitions throughout their academic career (K-1; 6-7; 8-9; 12-post HS).

GROUP THREE:

- Improve the morale of administrators, teachers, students and parents involved in our schools.
 - Recommendation: Make the student the center of the school system. Parents, teachers, guidance counselors, the school board and administrators should all be focused on seeing our students excel and achieve their goals.
- Increase the expectations for excellence in our schools.
 - Recommendation: Give each child a strong foundation (reading, grammar, spelling, math, science, American history and government) at the elementary level and build on and reinforce that foundation at the secondary level, apart from the standardized testing requirements. Create requirements in the student's personal learning plan

(PLP) at the secondary level to define the relevance and context of the foundational subjects to their own futures.

- Improve the transition from K-6 to 7-12 and 7-12 to College/University/Career. Create continuity of curriculum and administration by emphasizing one school district, one school and one principal.
 - Recommendation: Change the guidance process so it starts earlier and get the parents involved in the process. Provide ways for the students to explore career and college opportunities in the middle school.
- Get the community involved in the schools and the town.
 - Recommendation: Create opportunities for community members to voice opinions and concerns and brainstorm ideas and action steps. Community members should be able to see reports and results of their efforts.

GROUP FOUR:

- Communication
 - Internal Communication
 - Improved communication between the front office and other parts of the school.
 - Have a consultant come in and look at where the gaps are in communication within the school and help to improve this.
 - External Communication
 - Improved communication between the front office and the community, and the front office and parents.
 - Improved communication between the school and divorced parents (communication to both parents, not just custodial parent).
 - A “volunteer coordinator” position to coordinate parents and other community members to help with school events. This volunteer coordinator could also help to place students in community jobs or volunteering opportunities.
 - Hold an after school activities fair so that students can see all of the opportunities available in the school and the community.
 - Digital Communication
 - Improved website to help with communication between the school and parents/the community. Appoint a team leader or teacher for each grade level to frequently update information for the team/grade on the website. Post a syllabus when assignments are due for each class and when any important events are coming up either for the classes, the grade level, after school activities or the school in general.

- Send out important messages about school events on an email list and via text message and/or as a recorded message that goes automatically to voicemail. Include homeschooled students on these lists as well.
 - A recorded line with important information for people who don't have cell phones or answering machines.
 - Paper Communication
 - A weekly bulletin home for parents at all grade levels.
 - For people who do not have internet or cell phone access, use assigned "pick up points" like the public library or post office for bulletins and other literature that parents need to get about the schools.
- Curriculum
 - More courses offered to students, including more foreign language opportunities and music/arts opportunities.
 - More advanced courses and more challenging opportunities for accelerated students. Expand online opportunities for students, and create a cooperative exchange between Pittsfield and other schools (we share courses).
 - More talk about college, trade school, or other careers earlier on – like middle or even elementary school.
- Community/Parent Involvement
 - Adult mentors who are available to support students.
 - Parent resource center expanded.
 - Graduates of Pittsfield come into the schools for career days or other events to talk to and mentor younger Pittsfield students.
 - Job fair or career fair for 9th graders or early on in school.
 - A business showcase day at the school that emphasizes careers and career training.
 - Reach out to alumni associations, senior center.
 - Scholarship opportunities to get students involved in community service

GROUP FIVE:

- Magnet Schools = A school which attracts students, teachers, administrators, families, businesses to the community.
 - High graduation rate
 - Exceeds NECAP Test scores
 - Attracts and retains quality educators
 - Students follow through post-graduation plan that is tracked
 - Offer and attract homeschooler friendly programs

- State of the art technological infrastructure
- Curriculum committee and administrators collaborate to implement and monitor proven and effective teaching methods and held accountable
- Every child has and feels they have an equal opportunity to succeed.
 - Incredible teachers – affirming
 - Supportive parents and community
 - Teachers are trained, supported , encouraged and monitored (observed) to bring out the best in there students
 - School and community pride
 - Students feel like valued community members
 - Each student should have their basic needs met
 - Uniforms (yes or no)
- Communication = Promotes positive aspects of school
 - Improved email and print communication
 - Various forms of communication (text, phone, email, paper)
 - Keep it simple and informative
 - Better internal communication
 - Accountability (teachers, students, parents)
 - Teachers, parents and administrators communicate positive as well as negative
 - Positive testimonial about teachers
- Technology = Incorporating technology that enhances the learning experience.
 - Satellite campus
 - Electronic grade book and attendance (use PowerSchool to full capability)
 - More training for parents about PowerSchool benefits
 - Tech Specialist that can work with educators in meeting student needs
 - Use technology to monitor post graduate progress and all kinds of measurable things.
 - More training for teachers, parents, administrators bout technology
 - Model technology after successful schools. Implement and monitor

SENIOR CITIZEN FOCUS GROUP:

- Parents and teachers should agree on discipline practices
- Teach self-esteem to students
- Teachers should know their students better

- Exercise teacher authority and discipline
- Fewer, lower school taxes
- More accountability in school board and administration
- More options and electives in classes

MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS:

- Opportunities
 - More electives – more than just core
 - Wide range of courses in building (AP/College Prep)
 - Extracurricular clubs and activities
 - Learning outside the classroom
 - School to work: ELO, Job skills, life skills
- Resources:
 - New computers (updated)
 - Better access to wireless internet
 - New and updated books
 - Use the technology that's available better (ex: Smart Boards)
 - More supplies & basics available (access if a student needs)
- Teachers
 - Better communication with families
 - Stay longer – stop them from burning out
 - Passion for teaching – loves students and subject they teach
 - One-One
 - Willingness to go beyond school day
 - Fairness and Equality
 - Varied teaching styles
 - Small class sizes
 - Creative teaching – not just from the book (activities, projects, etc.)

RECENT GRADUATES:

- Transition/Change
 - Student voice – input must be heard, students must be engaged to make change
 - Quick changes made by other people cause confusion and disengagement

- Communication – a weekly, monthly, quarterly newsletter
- Involve everyone in the decision making
- Teachers
 - Teachers should be encouraging and pushing students to plan for the future
 - Consistent support
 - Passionate about what they do and teach
 - Personable – 1-1 connections with students
 - Take the time to build relationships with students
 - Build teamwork in the classroom and school
 - Create open and safe environments
 - Role models
- Community
 - Strong pride and spirit
 - Communication – what’s going on in the school and community
 - Learning outside of class
 - Collaboration with school and community
 - Community supporting school – come to games, events, meetings
 - Active participation!

The Action Forum: Recommendations from the Community Conversations

On August 25, 2011 an Action Forum was held at the Pittsfield Community Center at which each of the small groups reported its final recommendations. The recommendations from each group are listed above. We asked the entire group of about 50 community members to then determine what the key findings and recommendations were from all of the conversations combined. The priorities for action that were identified focused on:

1. Stronger communication
 - a. In multiple forms, including Power School, newsletters, and websites
 - b. Within the school and between the school and community
 - c. Enhanced by surveys to elicit opinions and determine the most effective communication mechanisms
 - d. To include educational and service opportunities, current events in the school and community
2. Enhanced curriculum
 - a. Recognize a range of learning styles

- b. Student-centered, enriched curriculum with more electives
 - c. Clear syllabi, signed by teachers and parents, to include assignments, transition plans, expectations for performance and behavior
3. Improved school organization
- a. Aspire to become a magnet school
 - b. Assure that the best teachers stay in the district
 - c. Improve the transition process at all levels
4. Stronger community
- a. Build pride through more volunteerism
 - b. Strengthen school/business ties through ELO and other means
 - c. Include homeschoolers as part of the educational and larger community

Additional Forums

In addition to the conversations reported above, two subsequent focus groups were held, each consisting of a 3 ½ hour facilitated conversation. Facilitators wanted their own group so they could express their personal views on the question, which they had been constrained from doing in their role as facilitators. We also conducted a focus group with elementary and middle/high school teachers, to get their perspectives.

FACILITATOR FOCUS GROUP:

- Community of Pittsfield as a Whole
 - Demonstrate ways to get involved
 - Strengthen Pittsfield Listens to talk about what separates us and to create a shared vision for Pittsfield
 - Deal with the history of no follow up or success on past efforts
 - Change how people see the town - - “Our Town”
 - More inclusive community activities
 - Accentuate the positive
- Communication
 - Loudspeaker or “town crier” idea to get the word out
 - Direct, 1-1 contact (text system, e-mail, phone tree, some kind of broadcast system)
 - More timely, regular, predictable
 - A communication central resource is needed
 - Electronic message board

- Sandwich boards and chalk boards
- More active consumers/participants in communication
- Finances
 - Nellie Mae grant
 - Focus on success
 - Increase involvement in the budget process and increase information about it
 - Strong schools – more residents and businesses needed
 - Demonstrate the pros and cons of eliminating schools – “real facts”
 - More creative, expansive solutions
- Schools
 - Involve community members and organizations in school; build more bridges
 - More community events at school including home-schoolers
 - Open school to all residents; “open houses”
 - Community education for adults
 - More diverse class offerings, more experiential
 - Strong guidance, career planning starting in the middle school or earlier
 - Support student leadership
 - AP classes
 - Running Start program
 - Better on-line courses
 - Include students on town committees
 - Concord vocational HS is accessible and flexible

TEACHERS AND STAFF:

GROUP ONE:

- *Administration*
 - Respect – teacher time and skills
 - Interest in collaboratively developing focused priorities
 - Commitment to **PRIORITIES**
 - Feels grant driven
 - Need more timely communication
 - Need expectations to be focused and reasonable
 - Would like to have the skills of teachers more valued and acknowledged

➤ *Parents*

- We need help to educate parents about 21st century learning
- Need to improve parent support of student's study skills
- Need to increase daily communication
- Need help getting people to understand the value of education and educational opportunities
- Hope to increase **respect for the profession**

GROUP TWO:

➤ *Parent Involvement*

- **Student led conference**, 85% turnout of someone who supports the student
- Find parent/community member strengths
- Involve parent's passions
- Create a parent involvement list "what can you offer?"
- **Adult education at night** with classes, use of the building (24 hour learning) and career development and exploration
- Community dances and dinners
- Ways to showcase interests
- Reach out into community – arts in the library/community center/Deerfield fair
- Support GRP for parents – how to do math? Fear?
- Some adults are not comfortable in a school building

➤ *Communication*

- **More stories in the paper – student of the month, teacher of the month, student pieces, also on the web**
- Keep log of information = scrapbook
- Continue the guidance newsletter with progress reports and pink sheet
- PES – teacher specific news
- Calling parents directly, parent surveys
- Alert now – auto phone/text/e-mail
- Parent workshops (such as on power school)
- **Report card – more descriptive/informative**
- More community-wide events
- Encourage parents to communicate directly with school

***Bolded items given priority**

Conclusions

Pittsfield is a strong community with a substantial core of dedicated, caring residents, many of whom have lived there most of their lives. There is a shared sense of duty to the community and its schools, expressed as a shared desire to see the schools improve such that more students graduate with high aspirations for continued education and career success. In order to achieve this goal, much more attention needs to be placed on innovative, creative, frequent forms of *communication* within the school and between the school and community. The schools need to be perceived as *responsive* to the community and the parents whose children attend them. Likewise, the community must be *supportive* of its schools through partnerships, involvement in school activities, and investment in new initiatives such as a magnet school. An ultimate goal of school improvement should be to create a strong sense of *pride* across all members of the community, whether they are long-time residents or newcomers who have moved here recently, affluent or not, young or old.

With respect to the schools, there is consensus that a *student-centered curriculum* that exposes students to a wider range of subject matter (including the arts) and that recognizes *individual learning differences* is critical. Expectations for appropriate *behavior* must be clear and enforced. Students and parents want close, *positive relationships* with teachers and administrators. More *experiential learning*, both within the schools and in the community, is seen as desirable. *Accountability* on all sides is seen as a crucial ingredient of school and community strength. The *transition* into school, from one school to another, and at the time of graduation is a particularly important point requiring careful attention and effective processes.

The success of the community conversations supported by PYW creates confidence that these aspirations can be attained. There was significant support for the creation of *Pittsfield Listens* as an on-going resource within the community to foster dialogue on challenging issues, whether related to the schools or the wider community. This will strengthen the community even further, and serve as an important source of the pride that everyone aspires to.

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