

Report: *What Matters to You?*
Community Forum
7 p.m., Oct. 12, 2010
Eudora Elementary School

A community forum took place on Oct. 12, 2010, to help educate parents and patrons about the financial challenges faced by Eudora Schools, and to collect feedback from the public on the level of importance of the four core values used by the Eudora Board of Education. Approximately 40 guests participated, representing a variety of age groups.

The program began with a 20-minute presentation by Superintendent of Schools Don Grosdidier. This presentation covered three main points:

- The critical role that state funding has in the Eudora Schools budget
- The challenge that will be faced when “new facilities” funding for Eudora Elementary School runs out after this year
- The importance of the current state finance formula – and equalization at the state level – to the district’s success over time

The attendees then participated in small group discussions about the district’s four core values – small class size, teacher collaboration, personalized education and early childhood. Small groups rotated through each of the four feedback areas that were moderated by district leaders. Comments, suggestions and questions were recorded by staff members.

Summaries of the feedback collected in the small group discussions is provided on the following pages. The goal in this report was not to provide a transcript of each comment, but rather, to provide a summary and list of sample comments that help illustrate the nature of the conversations over the course of the evening.

It should be noted that the small group participants changed freely, throughout the course of the evening. For that reason, the number of individuals in different sessions does vary. In addition, not every group was able to collect “ranking” information from every participant, which is evident in the ranking sections of this report for each core value.

Class Size

Over the four discussion groups, participants generally supported the importance of class size. Several individuals commented that small class size was the most important element for student learning, as it better allows teachers to tailor their instruction to individual student needs. Those who questioned the value of class size usually referred to their own experiences, 10 or more years ago, as a student or former teacher; they recalled classes with 25-30 students, or more, and commented that the student's learning and overall experience was satisfactory.

Regardless of their support or criticism of this core value, participants often referred to the important connection between the district's budget and the real expense of small class size.

Sample comments:

- [The smaller classes here are] a huge change in the system, and now students are more prepared for college. (From a current parent who grew up in Eudora.)
- Make class size the priority.
- Don't let economics force us to take a step backwards.
- I don't understand benefit of small class size. I had large classes when I was in school, and my children had at least 20 students in their classes.
- Class size as a core value gives your student a chance to be an individual and be recognized. It also provides a chance for the teacher to get to know the students.
- It is hard to keep in mind the bigger picture of the district. How important is this? If we keep the class sizes small, where else will we cut?
- I taught for many years with 30 or more in my class, and we managed just fine. Can you raise classes by just one or two students?
- If you had to make a choice, I would say to keep classes for the younger ones smaller, and, as students get older, they can increase the class sizes.
- Even with larger class sizes, there are ways to make it more personal. If teachers had more planning or collaboration they could plan more time to spend with students. Teachers can find ways to make it more personal for each student.
- When we went to school there weren't small class sizes. We all turned out fine.
- These are tough times, and we have got to cut back a little bit. Increasing class sizes is an area that we could save.
- I am always for smaller classes. Are there some classes that are easier to reduce class sizes than other classes?
- Social interaction is important. If your class is too small, then sometimes you can lose that learning opportunity for the socialization.
- [Small class size] is important, but it isn't always possible
- If your student is getting the individualized education, you don't have to worry as much about your kids – especially those with special needs.

Ranking of core value

On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being "very important," the average score of importance for Class Size was 4.6 (average of 35 rankings)

Teacher Collaboration

Teacher collaboration can be a much more abstract concept for most patrons and parents, as the benefits of collaboration for students often aren't distinguishable to the average observer. In spite of this fact, participants had many positive comments – in several cases based on personal experiences with their own children – that support the need for teacher collaboration.

Those who did not support collaboration generally voiced concerns with tying up resources and taking teachers out of their traditional role as instructor. A few participants expressed concern that the time in collaboration focused too much on students at the low and high end of the achievement spectrum, to the detriment of the “middle of the road” students. Several other participants also questioned why elective and specials teachers did not participate in regular collaboration in the same ways the core area teachers do.

Sample comments:

- Collaboration costs the districts too much money and ties up teachers during the day.
- It's very important – allows teachers to catch and fix problems and issues related to specific students.
- I just expect collaboration to take place and would be disappointed if it did not take place.
- Without collaboration, students would fall through the cracks.
- It allows smooth transitions [for students] from grade to grade and school to school.
- It's a big benefit to new teachers who are getting used to their jobs and learning the ropes of being a teacher.
- Communication between teachers is vital.
- Having collaboration assists with solving problems related to student learning and or discipline problems.
- Collaboration is job-embedded professional development.
- It's important, but compared to the others [core values], I'm just not sure how important.
- It's important because it's focused on students and individualized learning.

Ranking of core value

On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being “very important,” the average score of importance for Teacher Collaboration was 4.3 (average of 11 rankings)

Personalized Education

Personalized Education refers to a wide variety of programs – from small group instruction and at-risk programs to extracurricular and enrichment opportunities. With rare exception, there was overwhelming support for this core value and its ability to engage students of all abilities, all interests and all backgrounds.

The only concerns that were shared dealt with how few enrichment opportunities there are for younger students at Eudora Elementary. However, these individuals generally agreed that there may be personalized education programs at EES that they were simply not familiar with.

Sample comments

- It is very important that you get [students] interested. They are more likely to be successful and stay in school this way. If they are excited, it is easier for them to learn. This can help with reading and math because excitement carries over to other areas. I put this above [the core value of] collaboration.
- Benefits [of enrichment classes and opportunities] can definitely be seen at the middle and high school levels. I would like to see more of this at the elementary level. Be sure to pay attention to the enrichment side, by looking at true enrichment for students, such as foreign languages.
- Small class size allows for personalization, so personalized education goes hand in hand with small class size.
- There's the saying, *If you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life.* Career/technical training is amazing and very appreciated. This gives students the tools to make decisions to pursue career interests. I appreciate the offerings Eudora has to help my child explore career opportunities.
- This is good because it's unfortunate to see kids stuffed in a box and expected to all act the same. The hard part about personalized instruction is you have to ask yourself, 'how do we do this for each child?'
- This helps reduce the dropout rate because it keeps [students] from getting bored.
- At the kindergarten level, we don't have as many personalized programs as in older grades.
- When you are talking about special needs kids, it's very important to tap into what drives them.
- My daughter is getting a taste of her interest, which is architecture. This is a way to decide if she wants to continue. If not, it saves us lots of money on her taking the wrong college path.
- Collaboration [as a core value] is necessary to allow for personalized education. Teachers can discuss kids and decide best strategies to teach or support that kid.
- Catching at-risk students is so important [regarding the at-risk programs at EMS and EHS]. Breaking classes up into specific reading levels and offering support is crucial.
- It's important to recognize the kids needing enrichment, identify their interests, and offer things to challenge them. For older kids, offer options to all students, from the at-risk kids to the advanced ones.

Ranking of core value

On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being "very important," the average score of importance for Teacher Collaboration was 4.6 (average of 22 rankings)

Early Childhood

Initial feedback on the Early Childhood core value included clarifying questions that ranged from funding sources to program purposes. Some participants were concerned about the impact on district teachers if the all-day program were eliminated, including whether the half-day format would allow ample time for the curriculum to be taught and what kind of challenges it would create for first grade teachers.

Many participants in each of the four group discussions commented on the importance of early learning for all students, pointing out the advantages (both for the students and for the district) of laying a strong foundation for learning. Aside from a few comments and questions about Parents as Teachers and special education preschool, the majority of discussion over the course of the evening centered around all-day kindergarten. Participants weighed in on their personal experiences with the district's early childhood programs. Most who commented about all-day kindergarten said they found there to be a noticeable difference in learning and social development between students in a half-day program and students in a full-day program.

Some conversation related to the methods for funding early childhood programs, including how the preschool is funded, the breakdown of all-day kindergarten funding and the philosophy of all-day kindergarten fees. One participant proposed the idea that, in case of budget limitations, the all-day kindergarten program should be available only to at-risk students.

Sample comments:

- It's the parents' responsibility to get them as close as possible to being ready, although I do heavily endorse full-day kindergarten.
- It needs to be there because we hear more about bullying, manners, and these kinds of things. *Please* and *thank you* are seldom heard. Early childhood can teach these skills earlier, and problems such as these would decrease.
- I was disappointed that [all-day kindergarten] was on the chopping block last year and kindergarten teachers had to plead their case. I was disappointed that the district did not look at different avenues.
- A child's early education is the parent's responsibility, but there is a difference between low-income families and those with more money. It's not that they don't want to teach their children, it's that they don't always have all the resources. So we take it up as a community to help kids learn.
- I have had kids attend both half-day and full-day, and I haven't seen a big difference in the two. Parents are the primary educators, so there are a lot of skills [taught] at home.
- If my child had to go all day to [a private] preschool and then back to half-day kindergarten, I would be devastated.
- Preschool benefits the students with the structure and classroom-type setting.
- If budget is a problem, only students who are at risk should get full day. Most people cannot pay more taxes.
- It makes you wonder, *If they decided to go part time what would you do? Move to a district with all-day kindergarten, or just go half day and hope your kids learn and do better?* If you can give them the best, then why not?

Ranking of core value

On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being "very important," the average score of importance for Early Childhood was 4.6 (average of 36 rankings).