



MELROSE SCHOOLS LEADERSHIP FORUM

Hosted by the Melrose Education Foundation - July 23, 2014

Recap of key findings

MELROSE SCHOOLS LEADERSHIP FORUM

What we set out to do

Bring stakeholders together from across the district including MPS administrators, School Committee members, PTO boards and Site Council members, library and enrichment coordinators, leaders of community organizations and foundations who are active in our schools to:

- Learn more about and get clarity on key goals, initiatives and challenges happening in our schools and in our community (with a particular focus on improving district-wide communication and technology needs and planning)
- Meet other individuals who share similar roles and interests in the district
- Identify ways to best support these initiatives and overcome challenges

What we did

Hosted the Melrose Schools Leadership Forum on July 23, 2014 at Mount Hood in Melrose. Over 70 people attended representing a diverse mix of invited stakeholder groups. Cyndy Taymore – MPS Superintendent and Jorge Pazos – Chief Information Officer for the City of Melrose kicked off the session with overviews on district goals and challenges. Participants then broke into smaller groups and discussed ideas and concerns specific to improving district-wide communication and technology needs and planning.

What we learned

Detailed recaps of the communication and technology discussions are on the following pages. Highlights:

- There is excitement about progress made thus far and confidence in current city and schools leadership.
- Stakeholder groups want to work collaboratively to support broader district needs and goals.
- Clear, consistent and ongoing communication is key to make sure all are aligned on where we're meeting/exceeding goals, where we're falling short and how we can best support. Participants suggested that MEF host more Leadership Forums to keep groups/organizations informed and aligned on what matters most. We also should be leveraging more the existing communication channels (i.e., Mayor's Blog, Jorge's Blog, Melrose newspapers, principal email blasts, and more).
- District is significantly lacking resources (manpower, time, money) to meet required mandates. We need to think creatively on how to best leverage volunteer corps in the community as well as pool fundraising \$, identify new grant opportunities and matching programs, and more.

What's next?

- Share key learnings from the Leadership Forum with all participants. Encourage communication across schools and organizations – collaborate more on a city/community wide level.
- MEF Board to partner with admin and other key stakeholders to discuss future Forum topics, timing, etc.
- Jorge Pazos to share results from the technology assessment – begin with School Committee, Citywide PTO and Site Councils.
- Engage The Bridge to determine how best to match critical communication and technology related manpower needs with willing volunteers across the community.

DISTRICT WIDE COMMUNICATION

<p>Pluses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication seems easier, more fluid. New websites have helped. • There is sincere interest across schools, admin and parents to leverage communication tools and resources in place. • There's more dialogue happening – more connections between schools, parents and students. • Other forums/communication vehicles are being leveraged more – Tech Tuesdays, school/organization Facebook pages, blogs, YouTube, etc. • We have an opportunity to share a common identity and vision for MPS and our community. • We have the communication channels in place to easily share successes as well as tell the community what the needs are – in an honest and credible way. • Aspen has a lot of capability – seen as a powerful way to connect schools with parents and students. Conference scheduling especially has been very helpful. Community sees the value of Aspen being a “single source” communication vehicle.
<p>Concerns</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are many methods/avenues for communicating (<i>this is a double edged sword!</i>). Not all are used consistently/effectively (i.e., some teachers/schools effectively communicate, some don't; there are varying degrees on how much technology is embraced in the home; big reliance on paper in some schools, no/limited use of paper in others; etc.). Everyone has personal preferences. As a result, we're uncertain of what works across the district and what doesn't. • There isn't universal consensus on what needs to be communicated, to whom and when. • In the absence of consistent messaging/systems, school information is shared 3rd hand and can feel more like piecemeal/gossip than valuable information. • It can be difficult to pin down what information can be found where. • There is inconsistency with Aspen – it's used at the middle and high schools (though not consistently by all teachers) and not at the elementary schools. • Limited resources (people, time and money) to create more consistent messaging, dissemination, etc. Takes away from other priorities (“something's got to give”). • Limited training in place to make sure those who are using communication channels (hardware, software, apps, etc.) are doing so most effectively as well as those who aren't using and really should be. • Access to communication systems is an <u>equity</u> challenge (older schools don't have the technology in place to support communication systems; some families don't have access to internet/computers in their homes, etc.).
<p>Ideas for pushing forward</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need a common vision across the district. Common protocols, content/messaging, channels, etc. Identify success metrics and then report out successes/development areas to the whole district. • Create ongoing inventory/assessment of what information is available where and when. Confirm what's working/not working. Share insights broadly across district. • Understand more deeply what parents need to know and by when. • Ownership – who owns overall content, channels, and cadence? How can this be made a priority without sacrificing other needs/resources? • What are missed opportunities for developing content and disseminating to the community (i.e., are PTOs and Site Councils being leveraged fully to share information from admin?) • How can we simplify and streamline? Understand the value of each vehicle (websites, Facebook pages, twitter feeds, etc.). What is most important? What's a nice to have? What modalities are most critical for sharing all information with the community? • What push/pull strategies can we implement (i.e., how do we drive traffic to the websites when information has been updated)? • Create more opportunities for district wide conversation and collaboration (citywide PTO, citywide Site Councils, more MEF forums, elementary school principal forums to better understand what each elementary school is doing, etc.). • Evolve MPS website – what more can we do to leverage this resource? • Evolve Aspen – will this be central communication hub and resource? Mandate that all teachers use consistently. • What other channels could be leveraged more? Mayor's Blog? Jorge's Blog? Articles in the Melrose newspapers? Superintendent's/principal's columns 1x/month? • Identify more ways to create 2-way dialogue. • Identify informal training opportunities – demonstrate how best to navigate website and subscribe to ongoing emails, train teachers on how to further leverage Aspen. • Given the training needs – how can we best leverage volunteers? How can we identify those in the community with IT/tech skills to help evolve communication systems and platforms, train teachers, admin and parents, and more? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Conduct a community volunteer fair (both in person and virtually) – what are the volunteer needs across <i>whole</i> community (not just at the schools)? Match needs with willing volunteers. We're likely missing out on finding willing volunteers by only focusing on parents of kids in schools. ○ Leverage The Bridge more to source IT/communication professionals. ○ Create college internship opportunities to help with communication systems/training needs. ○ Leverage high school students who have passion and interest in communication systems/training needs – opportunity to earn community service hours. ○ Pool funding resources (i.e., PTO budgets) to support district wide training.

TECHNOLOGY NEEDS AND PLANNING

<p>Pluses</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan is in place! Big plus is that it focuses on all schools and provides alignment on priorities and how we'll get there. • Plan focuses on end benefit (impact on students' learning) vs. features and benefits of the technology. Device needs/uses go beyond standardized testing (i.e., we're not investing in certain devices solely because of PARCC online testing requirements). • Audit/assessment is the right step to understanding how best to support the plan. Will surface real needs and allow organizations to align on how best to support/fund. • Jorge's partnership with Superintendent and other school leadership (this was obvious during the presentation). • Aspen effectively ties parents to the schools and schools with parents and students. • Various systems, platforms, apps, etc. – in place (Chrome Books, district/school listservs, Facebook pages, school websites, etc.). • Some training/professional development in place – the informal/spontaneous approach is working.
<p>Concerns</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The lack of budget is surprising! How can we do so much with so little to support infrastructure, operational and ancillary expenses? Schools are being set up to fail with technology mandates and not enough money. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Tax base for school funding is unrealistic. Where can more money be derived? ○ Lack of grants for technology hardware (most focus on professional development). ○ Are PTOs expected to fund hardware? If yes, are we then short changing areas in which PTO has historically supported (i.e., enrichment)? • While a plan is in place – it's not seen as comprehensive nor does it provide needed guidance on how best to prioritize funding. No sense of what we can realistically accomplish and by when. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ PTOs and other organizations have money to spend – but don't have clear sense of what's most important. No pooling of fundraising \$ is happening across the district. • Challenging to keep up with the technology race. Lifecycle of hardware and software is very short. Six year replacement plan is almost impossible to achieve given the budget constraints we have. • Varying degrees of need and challenge from school to school. Becomes an equity problem. Not all schools are wireless. Older schools not equipped to accommodate hardware and software (i.e., older schools don't have elevators so can't accommodate the Chrome book carts). • What is value of the tech focused/online approaches to testing and learning? Are we creating more problems than we are solving with technology (i.e., uncertainty of PARCC, use of social media in the classrooms, etc.)? • Not enough tech support in place – not enough manpower to train and support teachers, admin, parents and students. • Aspen is not intuitive – can be difficult to learn/use. • Multiple platforms (systems, equipment, software, apps, etc.) in place. Difficult to integrate and keep track of what's in place, who needs training on what, what's effective, etc. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Organizations have made tech donations but some are not compatible with current systems, platforms.
<p>Ideas for pushing forward</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't lose sight of end benefit – why technology really matters. Focus on the impact it has on students' learning. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Show technology in the classrooms and value it has on learning. Leverage video to do this and put on school websites. ○ Identify needed technology related skills (i.e., typing, technology literacy) as students move from elementary to middle to high school. • Communicate learnings from the tech audit – what does each school have (hardware, software, apps, expertise); what do they need? Share with the district, the various organizations, etc. • Create universal funding plan. Identify how we can we more effectively share resources within the community and pool funds to support needs across the district. • Leverage organizations across the district (citywide PTO, citywide Site Council) – collaborate more on a district level. • Have Jorge provide more clarity on budget, spending priorities, key decisions being made such as leasing vs. buying equipment, etc. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Share with citywide PTO, citywide Site Councils; conduct more MPS leadership forums and have Jorge provide overviews as part of these forums. ○ Leverage existing communication channels to get key messages out to the broader community (Jorge's Blog, Mayor's Blog, principal email blasts, articles/columns in the Melrose newspapers, MMTV, etc.). Jorge can provide more guidance on how PTOs and other organizations can help. ○ Publish one-page fact sheets and distribute across the district. Distill information in an easy to digest way. • How can we effectively raise awareness of the many state and federal government layers tied to Education funding? We need to help the community understand that the bottleneck is also outside of our community and that all understand the challenges the city and schools are up against. • Educate community on overrides. Implement city-wide discussions to raise awareness and educate on the pluses and minuses. • What can we learn from other districts who have experienced similar \$/resource constraints and have managed to push forward? Burlington was cited as one example. • Explore more extensively grant \$ (especially hardware). Communicate tech needs to whole community. Identify possible matching programs at nearby businesses. • Leverage The Bridge to source willing volunteers to help with training. Create tech support clubs. Establish cross training opportunities for teachers, admin, parents & students.