Jefferson Parish Public School System:
Focus Group Findings
August 2013
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In mid-Summer 2013, staff from the Jefferson Parish Public School System approached Stand for Children Louisiana about facilitating focus groups with parents whose children attend Jefferson Parish Public Schools. The intent of the groups was to gather parent input about the proposed strategic plan for Jefferson Parish’s public schools and about the school district’s communications with parents. Five focus groups were held with 20 participants that represented 14 schools across Jefferson Parish. The participants in these focus groups clearly over-represented the parents of students in advanced and honors classes.

Findings from the focus groups include the following:

- Participants wanted an education for their children that would help them succeed in whatever career their children wanted. Many participants hoped that their children would attend college. However, others expressed that they wanted their children to be prepared for other trades or careers if the children opted for that path.

- Participants seemed more satisfied with their children’s individual schools than with the school system as a whole.

- Participants worried about what inequity across schools meant for their children if their children were unable to qualify for a magnet school or advanced academy.

- Although the individual schools varied in the quality of their communications to parents, participants expressed that they did not receive regular communications from the school district. None of the participants had strong information about Jefferson Parish’s strategic plan, though many participants said that they wished they had more communication from the school district.

- School turnaround and conversion to charter schools were the most popular solutions for failing schools. School closure for a failing school was the least popular option.

- Participants varied in their agreement with various messages. However, they overwhelmingly agreed with this statement: “Jefferson Parish Public Schools needs your help to ensure the success of your child.”

- Participants raised other topics, including school safety, school discipline, and parental support in schools.
INTRODUCTION

In mid-Summer 2013, staff from the Jefferson Parish Public School System approached Stand for Children Louisiana about facilitating focus groups with parents whose children attend Jefferson Parish Public Schools in order to gather their input about the proposed strategic plan for Jefferson Parish’s public schools. In addition, staff requested that the focus groups inquire about current communication strategies used by the school district, and they asked that Stand for Children Louisiana conduct some message testing with parents. The focus groups were hosted in late June and early July 2013.

The following report provides a summary of the focus groups conducted with parents. Sections include: a summary of participant characteristics, general inquiries about participant satisfaction with the public school system, participants’ feedback about the school district’s communications and its strategic plan, and participant message testing responses.

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Five focus groups were held with 20 participants that represented 14 schools across Jefferson Parish. In order to recruit focus group participants, staff from the school district reached out to principals to receive principal recommendations and contact information for potential focus group participants. School district staff then reached out to these parents directly to invite them to participate in the focus groups.

Focus group participants overwhelmingly represented parents of Jefferson Parish elementary and middle school students; the breakdown of their children is as follows: 17 elementary school students, 12 middle school students, and 6 high school students. The schools represented by the participants include: Chateau Estates Elementary, Gretna Park Elementary, Harahan Elementary, Joshua Butler Elementary, McDonogh 26, Paul J. Solis Elementary, Walter Schneckenberger Elementary, Haynes Academy, Marrero Middle, Riverdale Middle, Bonnabel High, Helen Cox High, Thomas Jefferson High, and West Jefferson High.

Participants included a Head Start teacher and a custodian at one of the academies. One participant has a spouse who works as the secretary at the academy where his children attend school, and two other participants regularly work as substitutes for the school system. One of the participants spoke only Spanish, while two other participants were bilingual, speaking English and Spanish.

The participants in these focus groups clearly over-represented the parents of students in advanced and honors classes. Outreach to parents of students in the general population may yield different results.

GENERAL JEFFERSON PARISH SCHOOL SYSTEM INQUIRIES

What is an ideal education?

Participants wanted an education for their children that would help them to succeed in whatever career their children wanted. Many participants hoped that their children would attend college. However, others expressed that they wanted their children to be prepared for
other trades or careers if the children opted for that path. One participant expressed that his children’s strong academic performance would pay off in financial aid for post-secondary education, and since he has four children, this was important.

Participants believed that education was important for everything, from reading street signs to reading the newspaper to surfing the internet. Many participants also expressed the belief that a strong education included activities beyond academics—such as band, sports, and other clubs—and exposure to different people, different languages, different electives, and different experiences. Many participants talked about the importance of exposing their children to a variety of activities in order to help their children decide their career or college path.

Finally, participants noted that they wanted their children to be safe and to feel safe in their schools. They also noted that an ideal education would utilize smaller classroom sizes, the lack of which some participants said could compromise the teacher’s ability to teach and their children’s ability to focus. They also felt that a good school should know their children as individuals.

**Are you satisfied with Jefferson Parish Public Schools?**

*Participants seem more satisfied with their children’s schools than the school system as a whole.* Most participants feel like their child’s school is preparing them for the future that they’re envisioning for them, or they feel like their child’s school is on a strong track towards improvement. Most participants also seemed generally satisfied with the quality of their children’s teachers. For example, one father commented that his youngest daughter did not know English when she first arrived in elementary school; however, within four months, his daughter was speaking English. He was grateful to supportive teachers for making that possible.

One participant did talk about her dissatisfaction with an International Baccalaureate (IBO) academy. Although she had been promised that the school’s program would be rigorous, she had been dissatisfied with the level of difficulty of the program. She mentioned that the school’s program was IBO in name only. Another participant also mentioned her disappointment that her son had had a long-term substitute in one of his classes. While she was able to tutor her son to make sure that he kept up with material and did not fall behind, she knew that other students had not fared so well.

*Participants worried about what inequity across schools meant for their children if their children were unable to qualify for a magnet school or advanced academy.* Participants knew that different schools had different reputations. Two participants brought up a newspaper article that was published a few years ago that mentioned the arrest rate at one middle school. The reputation of elementary schools seemed to fare better than the middle and high schools, as participants commented that they are “scared to death” of having to send their children from elementary to the local middle schools, especially if their children are not able to qualify for honors classes. Some participants said that if they had the money, they would instead send their children to private school. Worry about middle and high schools has led participants to feel that they have to “scramble” to enroll their students in certain schools, particularly Haynes Academy and Patrick Taylor, and it led participants whose students did not qualify for those schools to become very active in their children’s schools, either through volunteering or
working at the school. In this way, they could ensure that they were keeping a close eye on their children’s education.

Participants felt that different schools have access to different levels of resources. This seemed to bother many participants. Local participants as well as participants who had served in the military and participants who had moved to Jefferson Parish from other states were struck by these perceived inequities. Participants saw these differences in terms of offerings, such as music programs, as well as in the quality of facilities and the quality of teachers. One participant described a teacher at her child’s previous elementary school who was “just there to get a paycheck.” However, she feels that at her daughter’s new school, the teachers are much better. Another participant noted that he believes that the inequities across schools are improving.

SCHOOL AND DISTRICT COMMUNICATIONS AND OUTREACH

Participants were much more familiar with goings-on at their children’s schools than they were with what was happening in the school district. Most of the participants volunteer regularly at the school, work in the schools, or are active members of the PTO, and they cited their activity as a major reason that they were aware of what was going on at the school. Many of them also commented, however, that they would likely not have as much information if they were not as involved. Participants indicated that the PTOs at some of the schools are not as large or as active as they could be.

Schools and teachers varied in their streams and degrees of communication. Some participants receive newsletters from their children’s schools, or they receive notes or texts from their children’s teachers. Some of the participants mentioned that they appreciate and use the Parent Portal or e-board to have access to their children’s grades and to email teachers. However, some participants noted that teachers vary in the degree to which they accurately keep information up to date. The more up to date that teachers kept the information, the more likely participants were able to intervene with their children in a timely manner. Participants mentioned that substitute teachers were unable to enter information into the Parent Portal, which was particularly problematic for long-term substitutes.

Many participants said that they wish they had more communication from the school district. Some of them receive periodic emails from the school district, but these emails only include basic information (e.g., about registration). They want to know more about the school district’s discipline policy, about the plans for school closures, information about school board meetings, and even information about the teacher evaluation system. One participant also mentioned that in addition to providing information about when school board meetings are going to be held, it would also be useful to educate parents about the school board process, from first and second readings to how to find and read school board meeting minutes.

Some participants noted that they would like to be consulted about major district decisions, much like the Parent Advisory Councils had operated prior to the district’s reorganization. Participants feel that if more parents or parent representatives are incorporated into the process, then parents would be less likely to fight back against the system.
Texting and email were the forms of communication most popular among participants. Some also liked the idea of personal and automated phone calls and paper newsletters, particularly to communicate school closures or bus routes. Participants varied as to whether they prefer the newsletter to be delivered directly to their houses or through their children’s schools. Some participants use the school district website more than others. They might use the school website more often if they found that it had more relevant and up-to-date information. Participants intermittently access news about the school district through TV or the newspaper. A few of the participants thought that Facebook could be helpful, and they like the idea of including photographs on a Facebook page. None of the participants were Twitter users.

*Communications about Jefferson Parish’s Strategic Plan*

The vast majority of participants had heard nothing about the strategic plan or future plans for the school district. One participant mentioned that she knows that the schools are transitioning to Common Core. Others mentioned that they know that teachers are getting laid off and that some of the schools are being closed. Another participant mentioned that through a conversation with her child’s principal, she knows that principals have a shorter amount of time to turn around failing schools. Although participants have received bits and pieces of information from individuals at their children’s school or through the news, they have not received a cohesive vision of the school district that has been clearly communicated to them.

**STRATEGIC PLAN TOPICS**

*General School Options*

All participants expressed that the only students who have options in the school district are those who can test into the magnet schools or advanced academies. Many of them expressed frustration with the lack of strong schools for students who consistently performed well in school but weren’t able to meet the standardized test criteria for Patrick Taylor or Haynes. Participants encouraged entry at those schools to incorporate a more holistic application beyond standardized test scores. One participant suggested that the school should complete a profile of each 5th grader in the school and mail a letter to each family letting them know what the options for their child are, based on the profile.

Participants talked about school options in two ways: within schools and across schools. More often than not, participants expressed interest in within school options. They want a greater variety of electives and programs—such as wood-working, home economics, art, technology, music, and even etiquette—offered at all school sites. Participants felt like this broader exposure within schools set their children up for success in a wider variety of fields.

Participants also expressed interest in options across schools, though they seemed less clear on how these options would work, and a few participants expressed concern about segregating arts students from students interested in science and technology. Many expressed that they think that partnerships between Jefferson Parish schools and local colleges and community colleges are a good idea.

*Advanced Placement Courses*

All participants supported the expansion of Advanced Placement courses, and they prefer that the courses be offered at all high schools. One participant noted that every single high school
has over-achieving students that would benefit from Advanced Placement courses, and all participants agreed that it is only fair to provide all students with access.

Participants varied in their support for offering online Advanced Placement courses. Although this could expand access to students, many participants were concerned about isolating students, about student motivation, and about students’ home access to computers. Some participants felt that online courses could be particularly useful for over-aged students or students with disabilities that prevent them from getting to the school site.

School Turnaround

Some participants had had experiences with school turnaround, and they had mixed feelings about it. A few participants expressed concern that principals and teachers were being blamed for the poor behavior of children and poor parental support, whereas another small group of participants believed that it was worth examining the quality of a failing school’s staff and leadership. Some participants were concerned that if the population of children at a school remained the same despite a new staff, the school would likely continue to fail. Participants also worried about what happens with the principal and teachers who are replaced, and they felt uncertain that the replacement principal and staff would be an improvement over previous staff. In addition, two participants agreed that if the actual problem at the school failed to be diagnosed, one couldn’t be guaranteed that school turnaround would improve the school’s performance. One group of participants did indicate that if principals are going to be held accountable for their school’s performance, then they should have the authority to hire and fire their teachers, and they should be given three to five years to turn around a school.

If a neighborhood school was failing, given the choice between school turnaround, charter schools, expansion to middle school, or closing and consolidating schools, participants preferred school turnarounds or converting the failing school to a charter.

Charter Schools

Participants varied in their knowledge of charter schools. While one participant had had a child who previously attended a charter school in another city and one participant served on the board of a charter school, other participants did not even know that Jefferson Parish has charter schools. Most participants were unsure how charter schools might affect the quality of a local neighborhood school. However, when asked whether a failing school should be turned around, chartered, closed, or expanded to accommodate middle school, participants responded that they preferred school turnaround or chartering a school. One participant expressed a preference for charter schools to be run by local organizations, and the participant who sits on a local charter school board explained the strong accountability and autonomy that his school has. He explained that his board is better able to focus on staff that are dedicated to the mission of his school and that they have had very low teacher turnover. Their flexibility in staffing allows them to ensure that they hire the best teachers possible for the mission of the school. On the other hand, another participant offered that she supports converting a failing neighborhood school to a charter in order to demonstrate that charters aren’t significantly better than other schools.

Expansion into Middle School

Most participants opposed the idea of expanding elementary schools into middle schools, especially when this question was posed in the abstract. Participants cited concerns of 13-year-
olds and over-aged 8th graders on the same campus as young students. They felt that older students expose younger students to ideas that are beyond their understanding, and they were also concerned about the safety of the younger students. However, when asked whether they would prefer for their children’s elementary school to continue up to the 8th grade, some participants agreed that they would like that. One participant whose child is attending an expanding elementary school expressed that she feels “lucky” that her child’s elementary school is expanding because it permits her to avoid the frantic search for a quality middle school.

Some participants felt that an elementary school’s ability to expand to middle school depended upon the strength of the elementary school’s culture, and they mentioned that even if the elementary school expanded to include middle school, the different sets of grade levels should be separated. Finally, a few participants offered a revised model where elementary school includes Prekindergarten–6th grade, middle school includes 7th–9th grades, and high school is 10th–12th grades.

School Closures
All participants opposed school closures for failing schools, though a few participants expressed more openness to school closures if they resulted from budgetary necessity. Although one or two participants opposed school closures because they are disruptive, the vast majority of participants opposed school closures due to the uncertainty of where the students from the closed schools would go. Participants expressed hesitation at accepting students from failing schools that had closed because they feared that those students would negatively impact the receiving school’s culture and academic performance.

One participant, whose grandchildren attended a failing school that closed, expressed that the communication to the community around the school closure was very poor, and her grandchildren had trouble adjusting to the receiving school. Additionally, participants from that same receiving school commented about the change in the school, particularly around behavioral issues, due to receiving the influx of students from the closing school. School closures were the least popular solution for addressing failing schools.

MESSAGE TESTING

1. The Jefferson Parish Public School System is home to 80 schools that offer a diverse array of options for your child.
   Participant agreement with this statement ranged from strong disagreement to neutrality. Many participants felt that it is important for options to be available for their students, especially within schools (e.g., different electives or programs). However, they felt like most school programming is focused on the core academic courses. Additionally, they felt that the only way for a student to have options is if he or she could test into one of the magnet programs or advanced academies.

2. JPPSS is focused on preparing our students for success in college and beyond.
   Participant agreement with this statement generally ranged from neutral to strong agreement. Most participants agreed that their children’s individual schools are preparing their children for success. They felt that the teachers, school administration, and district administration are working hard in the best interest of their students, and they believed that
everyone has good intentions. However, they worried about the variable quality of schools across the district and about students who do not have access to honors and advanced programs. Participants doubted that these students are being prepared effectively for college or for alternative careers.

3. *JPPSS has made bold changes in the past two years resulting in student achievement.* Participant agreement with this statement ranged from disagree to agree, hovering around neutral. Participants agreed that Jefferson Parish is making changes, but they were unsure whether these changes are “bold.” Some participants did mention school closures, school turnarounds, and the firing of teachers. However, many participants wanted to wait a bit longer before determining whether the effects of those changes are positive.

4. *JPPSS is on the rise.* Participants also hovered around neutral in their agreement with this statement. Many indicated that the schools are improving, but they still have a long way to go. Others weren’t sure whether the school district is improving because they haven’t received recent school data. One father indicated that he strongly agreed with this statement because he had been involved in the Parent Advisory Councils prior to the current school board, and he could tell that things had drastically changed since the inception of the new board. He could tell that there was a different mood that was more open to trying new things.

5. *We still have work to do to make sure that all students in Jefferson Parish are at Basic or above.* All participants indicated agreement or strong agreement with this statement. Participants felt that some students are already at Basic; however, they believed that the school district needs to do a lot of work to ensure that ALL students are at that level.

6. *JPPSS believes your child deserves the best education.* Participant agreement with this statement ran the gamut. Some participants believed that Jefferson Parish is making changes but that all students aren’t yet receiving the “best” education. Some participants believed that they don’t know enough about schools across the district to accurately answer the question, and others argued that the school district believes that students deserve the best education only if they achieve test scores of Mastery or above. Other participants were hesitant to doubt the school district’s intentions and had had only positive interactions with school and district staff.

7. *JPPSS needs your help to ensure the success of our students.* Every single participant strongly agreed with this statement. Participants noted that it takes a “village” to raise a child. However, many participants lamented that more participants are not involved with their children’s education for whatever reason.

**OTHER ISSUES**

*School Safety*  
A few participants brought up the issue of security in schools with one participant referencing the school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. These participants talked about the open access to campus buildings as well as the need for additional security cameras. In particular,
participants with students at one elementary school talked about the need for a school office downstairs in order to serve as a barrier to entry to the school and to accommodate participants with disabilities.

Participants also talked about school safety in terms of bullying at schools. A few participants talked about how their children had been bullied by other students, and it had taken a lot of effort to convince the school to take action. One participant mentioned that she wasn’t sure whether this was because there wasn’t a bullying policy or whether the policy wasn’t clear, but she thought it was a big problem in schools. Participants also noted that parents at the schools need to step up to teach their children how to behave at school. Participants in the focus group mentioned that they feel that there needs to be stronger accountability for parents.

School Discipline
Some participants worried about the lack of discipline in some schools across grade levels. They felt that many students are given too many chances through suspensions or warnings and that this disrupted their children’s learning. They also worried about the examples that these students set for their children. A few participants wondered if there might be an alternative school to locate “the bad weeds.” While participants worried about discipline in the schools, they often attributed behavior problems to students’ home environments.

Parental Support in Schools
Over and over again, participants talked about how the home environment affects students’ success at school. Some participants complained that many parents do not care about their children’s education, providing examples of parents who failed to check their children’s homework or who spoke disrespectfully to teachers or the school principal. Other participants expressed that many parents’ work interferes with their ability to get engaged. However, all participants overwhelmingly talked about the need for parental support at home and in school, and some participants talked about the need for the school district to facilitate greater parent voice in the school system.