

K-8 UPDATE

3/26/07

Last Thursday a dedicated group of staff and parents met to discuss Communication and Decision-Making as part of the K-8 planning process. A summary of their efforts is below.

Communication Discussion Follow-up: Parents and staff have been discussing how to improve communication between staff and families. The discussion was sparked by communication breakdowns around discipline issues last fall. Based on the suggestions parents brought to staff, and staff response, three principles for future communication at Orca were proposed.

- 1) Parents would like to be informed about significant decisions/policies/issues, and have opportunities to provide input. They would like to collaborate closely with staff regarding any concerns with their child.
- 2) Staff appreciate the participation and involvement of parents, and want to emphasize the importance of respectful communication. Respectful communication considers issues of tone, staff expertise and accountability, staff limitations, and the recognition that many staff activities are voluntary.
- 3) Strong family involvement relies upon good communication. The SPS Alternative Education policy is a resource for developing community practices.

Decision-Making Discussion: Our governance structure for the Orca K-8 needs to support parent-staff collaboration and shared decision-making. As we develop that structure, we wanted to examine examples of successful parent-staff collaboration at Orca. To that end, members of the K-8 Steering Committee had a “fishbowl” discussion about our experiences, challenges, and what we’ve learned about working together as parents and staff. Some insights:

- Finding time to meet is challenging: aside from the relentless busyness of most of us, parent and teacher schedules don’t mesh very well.
- Once we do manage to get in a room together, we can work together effectively. We’ve enjoyed getting to know each other through this work, and it has helped us to understand the time/energy constraints and realities of each other’s lives.
- It’s important to make time to talk freely about big issues & philosophical differences. We also find that when we focus on the work at hand, those differences sometimes don’t seem as significant.
- Small group collaboration works well, but it’s harder to keep the larger community in the loop. People who haven’t been directly involved may not have a sense of what we have accomplished.
- Additional support for communication has been critical for our success.
- A commitment to listening and willingness to let go of our opinions has been vital to creating collective decisions.

We would love to hear more from those of you who have participated in other successful parent-staff collaborations: Young Authors, anyone? Math Night? Let us know.

Child-Centered Decisions: One of the ways we’re refining our vision is by testing it out, to see how useful it is in guiding our community. We decided to try using the “child-centered” concept from our vision to elicit some of the values we want to include in our decision-making structures. Some themes emerged from a discussion guided by two questions: “What does it mean to make child-centered decisions?” and “What would a child-centered decision-making process look like?”

1. **What is Child-Centered, anyway?** Well, of course, we could talk about this all night... and maybe sometime we will. The vision says: “Orca explores the dance between curriculum that emerges from children’s interests and lessons that develop essential skills.” For some of us this may mean offering engaging choices to balance required curriculum. Others want that dance to be about discovering what

turns kids on, and tapping into that passion as we develop curriculum that teaches them all that important stuff.

2. **Child-centered decisions come out of our deep love and knowledge of children.** We need to live with the children, observe them, know them, and love them. We need to be patient while they get to know and trust us in return. Parents have deep love & knowledge of their kids' individual selves, in a variety of contexts. Teachers have deep love & knowledge of their students in a school context, and may see different sides of the children. Teachers also have a body of knowledge about kids in general, developmental stages, learning styles, what's appropriate for kids at different ages, what they're capable of, etc. In making child-centered decisions, we need to draw on both general knowledge about child development & learning styles, and specific knowledge about each individual child.
3. **Giving children power.** In her classroom, Marletta gives her students power in a way that helps them learn to share it, to use it wisely and compassionately – thus cultivating responsible leadership & social justice in kids from kindergarten on. We need to listen to children and honor their feelings, consulting them as appropriate when we make decisions. We need to give them opportunities to make their own decisions – and mistakes – and learn from them. And we need to help them understand that they are part of a community – a classroom community, a society, a global community of 6 billion equally unique & worthy human beings – so they can learn to be flexible and compassionate, to balance their own needs with those of others.
4. **Modeling Community.** Child-centered decision-making recognizes that adult interactions serve as models for children. Kids rely on support from parents & family, teachers & school staff, and the wider community. They need to see that the people supporting them are strong, working together, modeling healthy community for them.
5. **Looking for Evidence.** At Orca we tend to be pretty good at observing students and responding to what we see, rather than just making decisions for them. (Not that we can't get better at this: it might be nice to help parents learn to do this better as they work with kids at school.) We may not be as good at checking back to see if what we are doing is having the desired effect on the children. The tools to gather evidence and evaluate our practices are not always easy to come by. Is there a way to use our kids' experience as a measure, in a systematic way?
6. **Scaling Up Takes Skill.** Basing decisions on deep love and knowledge of children seems pretty clear when we're dealing with one child, but it's harder when you're managing a classroom full of them. When we make school-wide decisions involving a dozen classroom communities each made up of 24+ individual kids... it gets even more complicated. A given decision will affect different kids and classrooms differently. Also, a decision made by one classroom can affect the classroom next door, and the rest of school as well. Pulling it all together takes skill!

Next Steps: Now that we have explored some of the ways decision-making can be child-centered – in line with our vision – the Process Committee plans to gather some information about decision-making structures at other alternative schools. We'll focus on models that support parent/staff collaboration and involve students in the process. The Alternative Education Policy Discussion next Thursday, March 29th should provide some helpful ideas. We'll come back with some proposals to discuss with larger community at a Community Wide K-8 Meeting on April 26th.

Three Cheers to Phyllis for watching the kids! The meeting could not have happened without her generously stepping up to fill the child care void!