



*Together We Aspire, Together We Achieve*

**A Report On The  
Cheltenham Township School District  
Middle Years Program**

**April 2007**

Prepared By

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In Collaboration With

Cheltenham African American Alliance

Cheltenham Achievers Network

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# **A Report On The Cheltenham Township School District Middle Years Program**

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Parents of Cheltenham are often faced with a challenging dilemma – how to effectively provide constructive input and suggest improvements to the school system while recognizing the impact of the statutory and fiscal constraints faced by the Board and administration. Parents have straddled this difficult issue for many years and we again find ourselves in this difficult position. To approach the dilemma, this report has been prepared in the belief that communication is the most significant means to resolve the challenge, promote community understanding and, ultimately, achieve progress.

## **Background**

As a way to focus the efforts of the United Parents Group (UPG) in the 2006-7 school year, this past Fall the UPG asked parents to identify their most significant issues. As they sifted and filtered the inputs, the middle years were identified as an area of major concern by a broad range of parents within the District. As a result, the topic was made a priority by UPG, and several UPG meetings this year have been devoted to the discussion of concerns about the middle years. For these meetings, individual parents and representatives of diverse parent organizations – such as the Cheltenham African American Alliance (CAAA), the UPG Special Needs Advocacy Group (SNAG), the Cheltenham Achievers Network (CAN) and the Cheltenham Association for Gifted Education (CAGE) – were invited to and did participate. It is worth noting that, despite the diverse perspectives represented by the parents of UPG and these groups, we are united in our ambition for high levels of academic achievement and excellence for all students in the district, and their dissatisfaction with the current status of the middle years in Cheltenham.

Each of these participating organizations is comprised of parents who are actively involved in the education of their children, and who have demonstrated sustained involvement at the school building and district level. Representatives of each group have queried their organization's constituents either through informal conversations, meetings or surveys regarding their concerns about the Cheltenham Middle Years program.

This report is an introductory approach to discussing openly a series of issues related to the two middle years schools that parents feel need to be addressed as part of ongoing program and budgetary planning. However, before beginning, we want to clearly recognize that there are many notable aspects of student development in Cheltenham's middle years schools. For example, Cheltenham has set very high standards in our music and theater programs, and the SMART and robotics programs.

## **Our Concerns**

As already indicated, the collaborative groups wish to recognize that Elkins Park and Cedarbrook are perceived as middle years schools. Although it is often stated that Elkins Park is an elemen-

tary school, the procedural changes introduced, the schedule followed by the students, the psychological and social treatment of students, to some extent the names of the schools, and the general perceptions of the community are that these are “middle schools.” Right or wrong, the UPG believes the implications of these perceptions are important for the Administration to consider in establishing the goals and objectives for these schools.

The issues expressed to date by parents cluster broadly into these categories:

- 1) Academic excellence and achievement
- 2) Discipline
- 3) Need for individualized services
- 4) Structure and environment

These concerns are summarized below.

#### Academic Excellence and Achievement

- As reflected in standardized test scores, there is concern about the decline in academic achievement after students leave the elementary schools. This suggests the need for improvements to the core grade level program.
- While parents are aware of and appreciate the range of developmental needs of middle years children, there is a concern that, particularly at Cedarbrook, social skills and social goals are emphasized at the expense of academic skills and that there is a lack of skill-appropriate differentiation within the curriculum.
- Parents are deeply concerned about what they perceive as a culture of anti-intellectualism and low expectations that conflicts with their goals for their children. This concern is particularly palpable for parents of Cedarbrook students who are anticipating the demands of rigorous work as students enter high school. The issue of low expectations is broad and deep.
- Children are taking “empty” classes, such as Reading Strategies and Learning Strategies, which consume time and resources, but often do not advance learning. Even enriched courses do not always reflect the rigor desired by parents and do not support the level of critical analysis, thinking and communication which are so important to functioning effectively in the world today. This is not a cry by parents for more homework or task work, but for better engagement and encouragement of critical thinking.
- There is a lack of continuity across the curriculum: skills taught in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade are not taught again in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades and the 8<sup>th</sup> grade programs do not appear to be fully aligned with preparation for the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. A new math approach that is different from what is used in the elementary schools is now being implemented, yet the implications of the new math curriculum at Cedarbrook have not been fully shared with parents.
- Although there seems to be a process at the Elkins Park School for intervening to address the needs of students who are not achieving, there seems to be no similar process at Cedarbrook. The value of academic detention at Cedarbrook as a tool for promoting achievement does not seem to reflect best practice.
- There is no systematic matching of students who need academic assistance with the various academic assistance opportunities at the schools.

- The 6-week rotation is not appropriate for all students. Many students would benefit from remaining in classes for a longer period of time.
- The use of LetterGrade is not uniform amongst the teachers and parents desire prompt entry of information into LetterGrade. Prompt information enables parents to better monitor and support their children's progress and achievement.
- The process of placing students in the most challenging classes provides little opportunity for parent input and very little explanation is offered to parents regarding the basis for placement determinations. This concern is especially pronounced with respect to the placement decisions for the transitions to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, to 7<sup>th</sup> grade and to 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Instead of promoting an opportunity to succeed, a fear of failure seems to guide placement decisions for "borderline" students. Limiting rigorous work instead of providing an opportunity for such work appears to guide placement decisions.
- Promotion of academic honors is critically lacking at Cedarbrook where honor roll, spelling and geography bees, and other academic honors are not central to the identity or culture of the school.
- Parent fear that PSSA proficiency will become the standard for academic performance instead of a meaningful high standard for academic excellence. Better metrics are needed that measure performance relative to the higher standards that Cheltenham believes in and purports to provide instruction toward.
- Parent/Teacher conferences need to be better coordinated with parents in advance, and not just focused on problems. Parent conferences should also focus on goals for students to achieve by year end and beyond.

### Discipline

- Some classes have discipline problems that are not effectively addressed by teachers and administrators, especially when substitute teachers are unable to provide sufficient oversight or when class sizes are too large to be effectively managed.
- There is a lack of continuity in the approach to discipline of the children. Although the Elkins Park School has an "expectations" program that incentivizes positive behavior and includes assistance for teachers, the approach at Cedarbrook seems to focus on punishment. The impact of this approach on learning and whether there is effective discipline is a question.
- There is a history at Cedarbrook of punishing an entire grade for the unique and unmanageable behavior of some students. While appropriate when students en masse can affect individual performance, parents see limited benefit when peer pressure is not effective.
- There are perceptions that the Cedarbrook administration is unsupportive of addressing issues of bullying and that Cedarbrook is willing to tolerate a level of misbehavior that parents would not allow. This is clearly an issue central to the parental dilemma.
- Behavior in the Cedarbrook cafeteria is very poor and additional supervision should be considered.
- After repeated requests by parents for early notification of student discipline problems, the district and middle schools have failed to implement a mechanism to provide for such notice. As a result, parents often discover school discipline problems after a pattern has been established.

- There persists a deep and troubling disparity in punishment for students of different race. Many parents are especially concerned that the approach to the discipline of African American boys is ineffective.

#### Need for Individualized Services

- There is an overall concern that the district employs a “cookie cutter” approach to education at the middle years level. The loss of individualized attention and support after students leave the elementary schools and go on to Elkins Park is not consistent with their needs and level of maturity. Although parents are often reminded that EP is an elementary school, students are often dealt with as if they have maturity beyond their years. Appropriate communication, given the children’s age, is lacking, as well. In general, while we recognize the administration’s focus on self-advocacy in these years, this is a skill that must be developed, not assumed, and there must be a recognition that students will not self-advocate equally well. This is difficult enough for parents.
- These schools lack the SYNC curriculum or differentiation in Science and Social Studies. There is no assessment of particular strengths and passions that students may have in science and social studies which might be keys to their academic potential.
- Inclusion may be not operating effectively. Simply sticking all children together in the same classroom is not an effective model without appropriate teacher training and additional academic supports to maximize the potential of differentiated instruction. Children may need help in learning to understand their classmates’ differences and in building empathy.
- There is a lack of understanding of the needs of middle years children with special needs.
- Repeatedly, we hear of parents who get burned out and frustrated by the need to constantly advocate for their child(ren). This is a particular challenge for the parents of special needs children who must be both advocates and experts on their child’s diagnosis.

#### The Environment

- Children who stand out in middle years schools are targeted for bullying by other students. The transition is hard for all students and harder on children with special needs, particularly for those with impulse control issues.
- There is a critical need for an informed school wide approach that creates a more productive and positive atmosphere for middle years students. Problems such as bullying and the phenomenon of “mean girls” should not be glossed over. Teachers need to be better trained to both understand these issues and to effectively interact with students from diverse backgrounds/cultures and those with differing needs.
- Reconfiguring teams each year is not appropriate for students who have difficulty with transitions or making new friends. The current structure leaves children without stability in classmates, peers, teachers, administrators, or even the school building over the four middle years.

The impact of these concerns on the district is significant and cannot be overstated. Increasingly, we all hear stories of parents who make the decision to leave the district or move their children out of Cheltenham Schools because of their fears about Cedarbrook. Other parents pull their children out of our schools midway through the middle years because of disappointment with their

child's experience<sup>1</sup>. While disheartening, these stories reflect an opportunity to grow and improve. While successes are important to note, it is occasionally necessary to learn from what is not working, so that core improvements can be made.

Finally, but critically important, all of the parents agree that the voices of children are important and can be an endless source of learning. Recently, the groups cosponsored a showing of the movie "Akeelah and the Bee." The views expressed by the diverse group of students at the ensuing discussion were a reminder of the intelligence of the children who attend our schools, their desire and capacity to express their point of view about their educational experience, and their need for high levels of academic excellence. Our children see these issues as clearly, if not more so, than we and we need to listen to them and involve them in improving their environment.

## **Recommendations**

Our discussions did not simply focus on the negative. Reflecting the enormous talents of the Cheltenham community, during our discussions, some creative and constructive ideas emerged which may merit additional discussion:

- The district should consider "exit" interviews with parents who make the decision to move their children.
- The district might consider reorganizing Elkins Park and Cedarbrook into two grade 5-8 schools to reduce the frequency of transition, and consider making lasting, smaller learning communities within the schools.
- The district might introduce more ways of connecting the various schools across the grade levels.
- The district should establish and publish metrics against higher academic standards for the middle schools and promote school cultures that are consistent with those metrics.
- The school district should organize a community summit on this topic that is open to any interested persons in the community.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to understand that the issues described represent our earliest efforts to understand the problem. We will continue to probe these issues through open communication, to identify best practices in middle school education, and to work with the district on solutions. We urge the school district to focus immediate and sustained attention on the concerns of parents about the middle years programs, both in administrative and financial planning. We hope that the Educational Affairs Committee will schedule this item for discussion in the near future and that the administration and faculty will respond to these concerns.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on information from the Philadelphia Inquirer's Report Card over the past four years, the number of school age children in Cheltenham Township attending private schools has increased from 7% to 17% -- a nearly 250% increase.