



Washoe County
School District

Incline Schools Focus Groups Notes

Group: Middle school parents

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Summary Comments / Notes:

1. Are you satisfied with the level of education students are receiving?

Classes are still not integrated enough. One parent said their student has observed there are few classes in his school in which there is any diversity.

One parent, coming to this focus group from a dad's day at a school, said there are many students in the classes who are not paying attention. They are distracted, talking to each other and not focused on what the parent said was an interesting lesson. The parent said students appear bored.

Members said there is much room for improvement, with middle school being the weakest link compared to the elementary and high schools. Middle school has the most negative comments made about it. High-performing students are often left behind while teachers try to help lower-performing students.

Class size is a problem. There are often 34 to 36 students in a classroom and physically cannot fit.

Students also disrespect their teachers, especially in classes in which some of those students should not be enrolled.

Members said budget cuts are having a huge impact on teachers' abilities to teach the fundamentals in math, particularly in algebra. They have a hard time making it through algebra and then go into geometry and students are overwhelmed by higher expectations because they barely passed algebra.

By the time a student finishes eighth grade, parents said, they start ninth grade unprepared and are surprised by the expectations of high school work.

Parents said teachers have good intentions, but the curriculum does not speak to the skills children need today to succeed in the workforce or in college. Students are no longer taught to think outside the box and organize. One member said, "We're educating like we did 100 years ago."

Parents said students don't need a ton of homework to succeed in their academics. There should be more aligning in the grade levels.

The educational system must do a better job of weeding out teachers who are not pulling their weight and helping students succeed. Group would like to see more parents speak up if they have a problem with a teacher's performance.

The curriculum and class offerings, in terms of diversity of classes and number of classes per subject, are very limited.

Consensus: They are not satisfied, but that education being offered now is not as bad as it was a few years ago. They lament the emphasis on passing tests rather than instilling students with knowledge and skills. They said it's difficult to differentiate when students have reached their reading level as they progress through the grades and that many have not achieved that level yet.

2. Do you believe you/your children are actively engaged and enjoy the learning process at school?

There's a lack of dynamic ways of engaging students. How teachers present lessons from the curriculum should be re-examined. This takes away from empowerment.

No Child Left Behind is a problem. There is too much emphasis on test-taking.

Parents would like to ask students, "Did you learn as much as you think you could have learned in a particular class?" They would like to see more evaluations from the students themselves.

Students have different ways of learning; some respond better to creativity. There should be flexibility for each child to learn in their own way without impeding on another student.

The love of learning is absent from most students today; they will do the bare minimum work just to get a passing grade without curiosity or interest in learning for the sake of learning.

One parent said one of their children appears to be bored and she's a bright student. The parent would like to challenge the student more to her abilities. The other child appears to be engaged.

Some parents' students in this group do enjoy going to school.

Consensus: Students are not engaged as much as they could be and often end up bored with the learning process.

3. If you could change one thing in Incline school to improve student learning, what would that be?

Member said they would like to see more integration in classes by giving English-speaking and Spanish-speaking students something in common.

Helping high-achieving students by offering something else to study, such as bilingual education from an earlier age than middle school, would help children on a social level. Many middle school classes are racially divided because most students stick with their own race.

One parent spoke of a particular teacher who does not control her classroom, does not send home books for homework and favors native speakers. They would like this teacher change her tactics.

Offering a broader variety of classes would cover different topics and increase the number of classes offered per subject. Students also need to be able to fit classes into their schedule. One parent said there is fear in Incline with a low enrollment and the budget's potential impacts on classes.

More language and science classes are needed.

More communication in Spanish is needed to know what is going on and for parents to provide help at home.

Consensus: They would like to see more learning-based instruction that encourages critical thinking skills. This would help reduce discipline problems.

Consensus: There's too much disrespect among students for their teachers. Parent asked, "Whatever happened to, 'If you don't want to learn this, there's the door?'"

4. How important is it to have a challenging learning environment? What does this mean to you?

Consensus: Extremely important. Students must think outside the box and be able to solve problems and respect a teacher who engages them. Every child has a different learning model, so teachers must be able to offer different views and teaching styles.

Consensus: It is important to provide a challenging learning environment and to engage each child. Work must be done with individual students to help them grow. If there are students in the classroom who are not interested in learning, there should be another class for those kids.

One member said when you're proud of what you do, then you were in a challenging learning environment because the work is more meaningful. You want to go to the next step and challenge yourself.

Members asked what else schools have to offer – sports?

Students must work at their level. If they're working at too high a level, they'll get frustrated but if it's too low, they'll get bored. Homework for these classes doesn't have to involve 20 minutes of assignments every day. Students need other activities to maintain their interest in learning and rigor.

Parent said one tragedy in the Incline schools is the loss of home economics at the middle school level.

Alignment means a very rigorous curriculum and environment in which students work well together and grow because of support from each other.

More parents are looking at alternative education to get students away from public school education.

One parent also feels challenged because they said they need to learn English, but works two jobs to support their children. However, they feel grateful their children are learning and are happy at school.

5. Respondents to the recent survey identified instruction in science as critically important. What are your thoughts on that?

Consensus: Science and technology are crucial in the classrooms.

They said it would be nice for students to be able to bring a laptop or an iPod to school, but schools don't offer WiFi. One parent said they heard it could be possible by the end of the year, but that it's expensive.

6. Respondents to the recent survey identified instruction in innovation/technology as critically important. What are your thoughts on that?

Technology helps engage students. However, the technology that is brought into the classroom, members said, must be current and right now they feel the District stagnates with technology.

Members said it must be a financial commitment to maintain working computers that don't crash consistently. Teachers also must be familiar with how to operate computers and teach their students programs and concepts. The group said they don't want to throw their money at technology in the classroom unless they were sure that it would be done right.

Some parents have visited classrooms in which every student had their own laptop for at least one class a day.

Parents want to ensure their eighth grade child graduates into the ninth grade knowing how to create a program or use certain applications. Students also must learn how to type and use spell check.

7. How important is it to have a vertically aligned curriculum among the three Incline schools?

There is concern about the Gifted and Talented program because they said it seems the teachers between the middle and high schools do not have conversations about the students and their profiles, so the teachers of incoming freshmen don't understand the students' needs. Curriculum also must be coordinated between the schools.

Parents said the community needs to take advantage of Incline's schools being so small; it's an advantage to tracking students more closely. They have heard Superintendent Morrison discuss the strategic plan and agree that it's obvious curriculum should be better aligned.

Students also should be better prepared in advanced math; teachers must be more creative in helping students along given the limitations some of those children may have. Otherwise, Incline could see some families moving out of the area and into other school districts. There must be wider choices for students.

Alignment is one of the problems the District has now. One parent was satisfied with the elementary schools, but middle schools are problematic. Students say math is easier this year than what they took last year. Parent has heard great things about Incline High.

Consensus: It is very important and that it will take accountability.

8. As you know, the Incline Great Schools committee is focused on making Incline Schools great. Do you have any closing thoughts on this?

Some parents believe the start times for each of the three schools don't make sense. They said it would be easier for working parents to have their children in school from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. so that children are not running around in the streets at 2:15 p.m. They also cited studies in which younger children do better when they're at school earlier while the high school students can have the chance to sleep in and do better later in the day.

They also said the current school times don't allow for students to ski; some members disagreed, asking, "Would we rather have good skiers or intelligent students?"

They also wanted to know why they have to drive to Galena for sports and games. They asked about the stadium and why it's not being built, saying it would be a nice resource for Incline students.

They ask why the parents of Lake Tahoe School are spending \$15,000 a year to send students to private school and what they are getting there that they are not getting in Washoe County public schools. They said there are both advantages and disadvantages to both.

There is competition in Incline and unnecessary dollars being spent on infrastructure. Putting all money from both private and public schools into one system with one set of schools could help create fabulous schools.

Parents said they want Incline schools to be the best.