

**ENGAGING THE HARLEM COMMUNITY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW  
PUBLIC SCHOOL: A REPORT ON COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT THE  
PROPOSED TEACHERS COLLEGE COMMUNITY SCHOOL**

**Teachers College  
March 2010**

Teachers College, Columbia University, has embarked on a plan to create a new public school for children who live in the surrounding community. The vision for the school includes a commitment to providing comprehensive educational opportunity, meaning that all students have access to essential resources such as high-quality teaching; a full and rigorous curriculum; up-to-date learning materials; out-of-school-time enrichment and complementary supports and services that address the physical, social and psychological factors that affect children's readiness and ability to succeed in school. Planning for the new school is led by the College's Office of School and Community Partnerships and draws on the expertise of Teachers College and Columbia University, community-based organizations and New York City educators.

**THE GOALS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

A public engagement process with the Upper Manhattan community is critical to ensure that the proposed new school serves the community's children effectively and that its plans to deliver comprehensive educational opportunity are aligned with the community's needs and existing resources. The public engagement process aims to inform the community about the planning for the new school, to solicit input from a broad range of stakeholders on a range of open issues, to incorporate their thinking about the school into the process for its design, and to keep community leaders apprised of the input received.

**THE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS**

Teachers College collaborated with Community Board 9 in hosting three *community conversations* about the new school to gather constituents' input. The forums were designed and led by the Campaign for Educational Equity at Teachers College. Two community conversations were held at PS 161, (133<sup>rd</sup> Street and Amsterdam Avenue) on November 12 and 14, 2009, and a third at IS 195, (133<sup>rd</sup> Street between Broadway and 12<sup>th</sup> Avenue) on March 4, 2010. To ensure participation by a broad range of constituents, two meetings were held on weekday evenings and one on a Saturday morning. The



events were publicized in advance by Teachers College and Community Board 9 to organizations, individuals, schools, tenant associations and churches through email lists, postcards and flyers. A total of 110 people attended the community conversations. Participants included parents, grandparents, teachers, PTA leaders, community activists, mental health workers, university affiliates and other concerned citizens and community members. At each meeting, translation services were offered; two discussion groups were conducted entirely in Spanish.

Each program began with a welcome from Ms. Patricia Jones, Chair of Community Board 9. Ms. Jones introduced Dr. Nancy Streim, Associate Vice President for School and Community Partnerships at Teachers College. Dr. Streim described the initial plans for developing a new neighborhood school in partnership with the New York City Department of Education.

## **STRUCTURE OF BREAK-OUT DISCUSSIONS**

Following the opening plenary, participants broke into small groups, to which they were randomly assigned for focused discussions designed to elicit detailed information about community needs and expectations for a new school. Each group was led by a trained, independent facilitator, using a specially prepared discussion guide. Each group was assigned a recorder who captured comments and concerns of participants, while assuring anonymity.

Participants were asked to give *general responses to the presentation of Teachers College's initial plans* for the school. Then they were encouraged to talk about what goes on in school and discuss basic pedagogical *issues of teaching and learning*. The next set of questions gave participants the opportunity to talk about different types of *parent, family, and community involvement* they would like to have in the new school. Participants next discussed how the school should address “out-of-school” factors with *wraparound services*. Participants were asked which of the following - health services; adult education; after school activities; early childhood programs - were most needed in their community and which should be included at the new school. Finally, participants were asked about the current strengths of their community and about people, organizations, institutions, or businesses that would make *good community partners* in helping to bring quality services to the children and families who would go to this new school.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES**

Participants' responses and conversations in each small group were recorded by a note taker. Notes were transcribed, synthesized, and analyzed. Themes, trends, and priorities were identified based on their prevalence in the different groups.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

From an analysis of the information collected during the community conversations, the following recommendations emerge as very important to the participants:

1. Ensure and support diversity in the student body;
2. Promote diversity in the teaching and administrative staff;
3. Foster a teaching staff with expertise to effectively reach a broad cross section of children;
4. Recruit a school leader who relates well to a diverse community;
5. Be mindful of and work to minimize any negative impact of this new school on existing schools;
6. Create opportunities for further community engagement in planning and ongoing work of school;
7. Design multiple strategies for creating and maintaining good communications with families and community;
8. Employ multiple strategies for ensuring a welcoming environment at the school;
9. Create various and flexible opportunities for family and community involvement with school;
10. Provide high-quality after-school, health services, and adult educational services in the school or through strong community linkages;
11. Take advantage of strengths and riches of the community to build partnerships to offer high-quality programs and services; and
12. Consider incorporating a “green” (environmental and healthy food) theme at the school.

The following pages of this report provide a detailed summary and analysis of participants’ responses, including reactions to the opening plenary, priorities for teaching and learning, priorities for family and community involvement and priorities for “wraparound services.” It also includes a catalog of potential community partners gleaned from the discussions.



## DETAILED SUMMARY

### I. Responses to Opening Plenary

To begin the breakout discussion, participants were asked to share their reactions to the presentation about the planning for the new school. A number of participants spoke of the need for more high-quality, stable public school options in their community. Many parents were already sending or considering sending their children to school in other parts of the city. Some parents of young children said they were considering moving to a different neighborhood because there were so few viable public school options nearby; some of these parents said they wanted to support a neighborhood school and were encouraged by the news that a new school would be opening and eager to “make sure it became a reality.” A mix of positive responses, questions, and concerns were expressed, which are detailed below.

#### *Many Positive Responses*

Some participants expressed feelings of general excitement and hope about the project. Many responded positively to the school’s connection with Teachers College (TC), specifically to TC’s investment of time, resources and expertise and its commitment to providing services to the community and to staying involved for the life of the school.

A number of participants expressed satisfaction with the specific resources that Teachers College would provide to the school, including access to the library, computer lab, and the pool. Others acknowledged the important support for teachers that it would bring; The Reading and Writing Project, in particular, was mentioned by several participants.

There were also positive reactions to the proposed school’s overall philosophy and direction. A number of participants said they were looking for innovation, and, having seen a lot of schools that were focused on test taking, commended the idea of a school that engaged students as creative and independent thinkers. The global focus, the lack of academic screening, the PK-8 grade continuity, and the whole-child approach offering broad student and family support (comprehensive educational opportunity) were all singled out for praise.

Finally, a number of people stressed how important it was that Teachers College was including the community in the conversation about creating this new school and encouraging the involvement of families, community members, and the community board, to create bonds with the community. It was particularly important to some members of the group to see Dr. Streim from Teachers College and Ms. Jones from Community Board 9 at the meeting.

#### *Questions and Concerns*

Participants also expressed many questions and concerns about the project. A number of the questions dealt with fundamentals of the project that are still unresolved, for example,



when the school will open, where it will be located, whether it will house a gifted and talented program, who will be eligible to apply, what the application process will entail, and what percentage of interested and eligible children the school will be able to accommodate.

There were questions about the staffing of the school, in particular about the staff-to-student ratio, where teachers will come from and how quality will be assured, and whether parents might take part in the process of staffing the school. It was hoped that a small teacher-student ratio would be possible, that members of the community would choose to work as teachers or administrators of the school in order to reflect the student population, and that TC would “bring the best, brightest, and nicest into the community.” Presumably because of the school’s affiliation with TC, a number of participants were interested in whether the new school would be a “lab” for new teaching techniques, whether “experimental” teaching would be used, and what role student teachers would play in the school.

Two additional strong themes in participants’ comments concerned the *impact of this new school on existing neighborhood schools* and on the *need for further community involvement* in the development and planning of the school.

#### *Concern about Impact on Existing Neighborhood Schools*

A large number of participants wondered how the creation of this new school would affect other schools in the community and how the school would relate to those schools. Many expressed concern about tensions that might arise around perceived inequities between this new school and existing schools. For example, there were worries that the school might draw the better students from existing schools, that it might be housed with an existing school, and that it might be conspicuously more “resource rich” than other local schools, causing a sense of hierarchy. Others wondered whether the TC school would be able to share its knowledge, for example, about how to be a community hub, and its resources with other schools and with the community more broadly.

#### *Need for More Community Engagement*

Some participants called for more extensive and diverse outreach to ensure greater community involvement in the conversations about the school and sufficient diversity in participation in the school. Although they were happy for the opportunity to enter into a dialogue at these meetings, a number of people voiced their disappointment at the turnout and expressed the need for additional community conversations and broader outreach so that more people would know about them. “We need to be aware of who is *not* in the room and reach out to them.” On a related note, a number of participants said that it was important that there be a mix of students of different abilities and socioeconomic strata in the school and that the school truly reflect the socioeconomic characteristics of the community.



## **II. Priorities for Teaching and Learning**

Next, participants were asked to get a bit further into the “nitty-gritty of teaching and learning” and were given a chance to talk about what they considered the most important aspects of a school for a child’s success. A number of common responses and themes emerged:

### ***Effective Teachers***

Not surprisingly, the largest number of responses to this line of questioning focused on good teaching. Participants said that it was important to have well-prepared, experienced teachers who would make a long-term commitment to the school. They had a lot to say about what made a teacher effective, commonly-citing the following qualities: flexibility, engagement, good classroom management skills, maintaining high expectations of all students and being able to handle the active as well as the shy kids. Others said a teacher should be someone with solid knowledge of child development, responsiveness to children, the ability to identify children’s individual learning needs and be respectful of children’s interests; that a good teacher is open and available, inspiring and motivating, creative, and not just focused on “the tests”; and that effective teachers are emotionally healthy, enjoy teaching, and are constantly learning.

To ensure good teachers and teaching, participants felt it was important to have strong coaches or mentors for new teachers, a supportive administration to curb teacher turnover and teacher burn-out, and good ongoing professional development.

### ***Strong Leadership***

After teaching, the next most mentioned aspect of a school necessary for a child’s success was strong leadership from the principal and administration. A number of qualities of effective leadership were identified: a strong principal is focused on the mission of the school, good at working with parents, the community, and the Department of Education. They are energetic, passionate, flexible, responsive, and hands-on; and they create a school culture that supports good teaching.

A number of participants thought it important that the principal and teachers be empowered to make their own decisions, though some valued autonomy from the central administration and others mentioned autonomy from parents as important.

### ***Authentic Partnership with Families***

Participants felt that children’s success in school depended on a real partnership between their school and their families (this topic was also explored more thoroughly later in the conversation.) They named specific elements of effective family involvement, saying that a school should: reach out to parents, actively engage them, and draw them into the life of the school. The principal and the teachers should make parents feel welcome and should promote a variety of ways in which parents/families can support their child’s education,



ranging from PTA involvement to supporting homework. Participants suggested meetings and workshops, newsletters and email, and a strong parent coordinator as vehicles for effective family involvement. Good communication between teachers and parents and between the school and its community was highlighted as an extremely important ingredient of a successful school.

### ***Child-Centered Environment***

Another commonly-expressed idea was that an effective classroom should feature child-centered or child-driven learning. Participants supported a style of education that promotes creativity, lets children take initiative, is a partnership between the children and the teacher, and features critical thinking over memorization. In a related vein, many participants discussed the importance of teaching that responds to students' different learning needs. Some talked about "student learning differentiation"; others talked about individual attention, small group instruction, responsive teaching, diverse modes of instruction, recognition of individuality, and "taking kids where they are."

A number of participants also discussed the need for school to support the social and emotional development of children through its teaching and through the use of other professionals like counselors, psychologists, and social workers, when appropriate.

### ***Fostering and Supporting Diversity***

Diversity was another theme discussed by a number of participants, and it was raised in various ways. Many talked about the importance of investing in outreach to ensure that the school's student population reflected the diversity of the community. Many also called for a diverse school staff that would be sensitive and supportive to all families and that would work with students without preconceptions. Others cited the need for books and curricula that support diversity – "from Shakespeare to Ntozake Shange" - and for opportunities to use cultural and language diversity as an intellectual asset and a school and classroom resource.

### ***Broad Curriculum Including Experiential and "Nonacademic" Learning Opportunities***

Many participants spoke of the need for a rich, balanced curriculum with strong math and science, strong humanities, and ample access to the arts. They suggested the importance to students of access to learning opportunities that complement traditional academic classroom activities. Some called for experiential, real-world learning opportunities, especially using the city and the community as learning resources. Some mentioned the importance of hands-on lessons demonstrating the importance of civic engagement and community service. Others emphasized recreational and physical education activities, arts activities, and activities to build social skills. A number of participants thought that it was important that the school have a focus on environmental awareness, community access to healthy food, good nutrition, and other "food justice" issues. A strong interest in



environmental issues, especially as they relate to food and nutrition, was expressed in other parts of the conversation.

### ***Facility Needs***

Citing overcrowding in the district, a number of people mentioned the importance of having a facility that has sufficient space, that is accessible to everyone, that allows all the grades of the school to be in one building, that is clean, safe, and bright, and that has enough indoor and outdoor space for physical activity and sports. They cited small class size as very important to students' success in school.

### ***Assessing Student and School Success Authentically***

Some participants thought it important that the school look beyond test scores to assess success, citing students' application of knowledge, expansion of curiosity, and engagement with school as other important indicators. Others said that grades and how students were doing on tests and other Department of Education measure were important indicators for them that a school was succeeding.

## **III. Priorities for Family and Community Involvement**

There are many different ways for schools to engage families and the community and it is important for the means to match the needs of the school community. The forum provided an opportunity for parents and community members to discuss how they would like to be involved in the school and their children's education, as well as what the school should do to foster their involvement. Themes common to the discussions are described below.

### **Good Communication and Accessibility**

The priority interest of participants, the majority of whom were parents, was for good communication between school and families and for accessibility of administration and staff to families. Regular communication about the school and the classroom was considered key to parent involvement. Participants recognized a need for a system of communication between teachers and families, so that parents would receive regular updates and participate in two-way communication. Vehicles mentioned included: frequent parent-teacher conferences, regular alerts and newsletters and the use of interns or other third parties to share information with families.

Similarly, participants referred to the need for the principal and teachers to be accessible to parents, including being available after-school when working parents are able to talk. They said staff should be approachable, open to dialogue, and responsive to input. They discussed the need for a true partnership between families/parents and teachers; saying teachers should enlist parents as allies in the education of children throughout the year and not just when problems arise. In fact, many participants said that they required little



involvement beyond really good two-way communication with teachers about the progress of their child.

### ***Use of Technology***

A number of participants thought that using technology, like websites, email, blogs, listservs, and social networking sites, could strengthen communication, accessibility, and family involvement.

### **Principal's Leadership Role**

Participants agreed that the principal plays a critical role in fostering family involvement. Specifically, they said the school leader needs to feel and to convey authentic respect and openness to families; creating expectations for the school and for parents about their partnership, seeking out hard-to-reach families, and doing what it takes to make parents feel welcomed by the school. They also stressed the importance of the principal knowing the school community and understanding what parent and community expertise can be applied to meet the needs of the school.

### **Diversified Roles for Families**

#### ***Families as Educational Resource***

Participants spoke about ways in which diverse families are a potential resource for the school. Among parents and other family members there is a plethora of knowledge, talents, and skills that can be an asset to teaching and learning. They encouraged reaching out to families to understand and make use of these assets.

#### ***Need for Flexibility and Variety in Types of Involvement***

Participants stressed the need for the school to employ creativity, flexibility, and variety in its strategies for involving families in the education of their children and the work of the school. They felt such strategies are necessary to deal appropriately and respectfully with the diverse range of backgrounds, cultures, languages, needs, and availability of families in the community. They mentioned a range of ways for people to be involved, would be sufficient in number and variety, from governance and leadership roles, to involvement in homework. Specifically they said there should be opportunities for working parents and stay-at-home parents, for grandparents and other caregivers that may involve shorter- or longer-term commitments, and not necessarily being on the school campus.

Most participants also encouraged flexibility in expectations for how parents contribute. There was a range of opinion, however, about how prescriptive the school should be in whether they participated. Some felt that it was important that teachers provide a range of opportunities but urge all families to do something; others felt that the schools should



provide a range of opportunities but not pressure families to get involved. These participants felt that involvement should not be an additional burden for families.

### ***Supporting Some Families Further***

Effective family involvement means supporting families with the knowledge and tools they need to be involved, according to participants. Specifically, they stressed the need for information about parents' rights and their children's rights, as well as on what to expect in the classroom and how to help children with homework, and with translation services for non-English-speaking parents.

### **Fostering a Strong, Mutually Supportive School Community**

Participants promoted the provision of opportunities for parents to get to know each other and learn from one another. Such opportunities for parents to build relationships with other parents were considered essential for community building and school cohesion. They would bridge cultural diversity by allowing parents to share experiences and real-world knowledge, which connects to the school's global focus. In such an environment, parents could serve as mentors for one another, making sure that they all have the necessary skills and knowledge to support their children's education, and work together to support all children's learning.

### ***Activities***

Participants suggested a number of special activities to foster family and community involvement. Among them were:

- School and community clean-ups
- Film nights for families and communities members
- Parent forums and other get-togethers designed to create community among parents
- School trips for students and their families
- A school vegetable garden
- Parent-to-parent education workshops
- Parent workshops for students to share special skills/talents
- Weekend parent retreats
- Teacher-led workshops to help parents help the students with their homework

### ***Parents in the Classroom***

Parents very much want to feel welcome in their children's classrooms. To this end participants suggested structured ways in which parents could participate there. These included having portions of the day when parents could play a helping role, such as reading to children; times when parents could observe teaching and learning; and leadership roles for certain parents, such as class representative or liaison.

### ***Students without Involved Parents***



Participants also voiced sensitivity to the plight of children without involved parents or family members. They hoped that these students could find support from other parents and that they would not be penalized for not having parents who could participate in the life of the school.

### **TC's Community Conversations**

Finally, a number of participants said that the Community Conversations were a good start in creating a partnership between the community and the school.

## **IV. Priorities in “Wraparound” Services**

Research shows that to succeed academically, all children need a high quality, well-equipped school and they also need a wide range of supports, resources, services, and opportunities outside of school, such as early childhood education, health care, after-school activities, and family support. This full range of educational supports has been called *comprehensive educational opportunity*. Participants were asked for their input about which services they consider most essential in their community and how important it is that they are provided to the families and students in this new school. They discussed their priorities and were asked about any other resources or services that should be provided in the new school. Their priorities are described below.

### **After-School Programs**

Although there is no way to calculate priority rankings definitively, according to the information collected, the greatest number of groups prioritized after-school activities among the services listed. Many participants ranked after-school programs first because they play such an important role for working parents; helping to keep students safe and out of trouble, and providing a range of important complementary learning opportunities for children, including arts, athletics, and academic tutoring.

After-school programs, participants said, should be free or low cost and have flexible hours to accommodate a variety of schedules. In addition, they should take advantage of community resources to provide a range of caring adults who are real professionals in different fields and who can pass on their knowledge, skills, and experience to students and also act as mentors. Some programs should be bilingual or dual language in order to strengthen students' home language and English skills. Some participants said they thought it important that after-school programs be open to all children in the community, rather than just the students in this school.

### **Health Services**

Health services were also ranked as a high priority by a large number of groups, and they linked student health and learning. It was clearly important to many that families could



have children's health needs attended to at school. Specifically, participants mentioned the benefits of having medical staff on site to create a place where students felt comfortable to go with their health issues. They also said it was important to have the school linked with a full-service clinic nearby.

Many participants said that mental health services should also be offered; specifically counseling for students and parents, support groups for parents and specific groups of students, as well as services around life transitions. Some also said that a child study team working in conjunction with school-based health personnel could help with appropriate referrals and help prevent students from being misidentified for special education.

Participants also identified the opportunity to have bilingual health staff to ensure that students' health needs would not be missed because of language barriers. In addition, health services staff could play the important role of connecting school families with other health services that are available in the community. Other health service needs identified by participants included a dental clinic, an optometry clinic and age-appropriate sex education and hygiene.

Finally, a number of participants also stressed the need for good nutrition and nutrition education in the school, which included healthy meals and snacks. Recess, sufficient play space, and physical education were also mentioned as necessary for student health.

### **Early Childhood Education**

Many participants said that early childhood programs were important, but fewer groups listed them as higher priority than the two types of services mentioned above. Those that did, spoke of the importance of this foundational educational experience and of the scarcity of such programs in the communities. Many participants recognized the need for high-quality early childhood education programs that were affordable to families in the community. Some also talked about the importance of parent education in children's very early years and mentioned the Harlem Children's Zone Baby College as a useful model.

### **Adult Education**

A significant number of groups ranked adult education as a high priority, but not as many as prioritized after-school and health services. Those that prioritized adult education said that if parents were well informed and better educated, students would be more likely to get the academic support and other services they need. Among the adult education needs most frequently mentioned by participants were English and other language classes; workshops about the curriculum, the special education system, and planning for high school and college; parenting classes; adult literacy classes; GED classes; career services; computer literacy classes; and stress management.

On the other hand, a few participants expressed the opinion that the school's resources should be allocated directly to the development of children. These respondents said the



school “can’t do everything for the community” and that it was more important that the school should provide for children.

### **General Support for Comprehensive Approach**

Most participants were enthusiastic about the school’s philosophy of comprehensive educational opportunity and understood the educational advantages for children and the practical advantages for families of such an approach. Most participants said they thought that each of the four services mentioned was important, and many expressed the belief that these services “were all desperately needed” and should be all provided to ensure children’s success in school.

### **Questions and Concerns**

Participants raised a number of other questions and concerns related to the provision of these services. Some asked about the school’s capacity to tap resources, coordinate these services and share its approach with other schools. Some discussed the importance of ensuring that services do not overlap but do create synergy with one another. Others asked about plans for sustaining funding for these services, citing other schools that have tried but have not been able to sustain them. Finally, the need for diverse staff, community involvement in decision making, and weekend services were mentioned as important provisions.

## **V. Community Resources**

Participants were asked which community organizations, institutions, businesses, or individuals might make good partners in helping to bring quality services to the children and families who go to this new school. Their responses were as follows:

#### Residence-based organizations

- Tenants associations
- Block associations
- Homeowners associations
- Building superintendents
- Hamilton Heights homeowners association
- Morningside Area Alliance

#### Faith-based institutions

- Riverside Church
- St. Joseph’s Church on Morningside, they have a food pantry, social services and social opportunities
- Other local churches/synagogues/religious institutions

#### Academic institutions

- Nearby universities (CU, TC, CCNY, Bank Street)



- Institute for Urban and Minority Education
- Boricua College
- Harlem Children's Zone
- Other public schools

#### Outdoor spaces

- Riverbank State Park
- Community gardens
- Farmers' markets

#### Arts/cultural organizations

- Harlem School of the Arts
- Lincoln Center
- Aaron Davis Hall
- Manhattan School of Music
- Dance Theatre of Harlem
- Children's Art Carnival
- Harlem Textile Works
- Harlem Arts Alliance
- Jazzmobile
- Schomberg Museum
- Studio Museum of Harlem
- Harlem Stage
- Alvin Ailey
- Music Together
- Nitchén Children's Museum of Native America
- Morris-Jumel Mansion
- Arts Horizons Leroy Neiman Art Center
- Dwyer Cultural Center

#### Mentoring organizations

- Boys and Girls Club
- Police Athletic League
- Blue Nile Passage
- National Society of Black Engineers

#### Local businesses

- Karate schools
- Fairway, Citarella, Gourmet Garage
- Supermarkets/bodegas
- Bill Telepan, Telepan Restaurant and Wellness Café project
- Café One
- Chamber of Commerce
- Bent on Learning Yoga



- Grocery stores
- Food coops
- Banks
- Parks
- Post office
- Libraries
- Galleries

#### Immigrant Organizations

- Senegalese Association of America
- Donar
- Allianza Dominica
- African Hope
- Hispanic Society

#### Health institutions

- Harlem Hospital
- Columbia Medical School
- Columbia University School of Public Health
- Other local health centers

#### Individuals

- Community artists
- Craftspeople
- Teachers
- Harlem elected officials
- Older residents/seniors
- Chefs

Finally, throughout the conversations, a recurring theme was the need for the school to provide environmental and nutritional education and access to healthy food for students and their families through such ideas as a rooftop garden or an on-site farmers market and connections with local organic produce coops, markets, and chefs.