

HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION

Meeting October 21, 2009

Commissioners Present: Ayse Atasoylu, Kati LaBraico, Lori Likis, Khari Milner, Pauline Mauras, Reverend Lorraine Thornhill

Staff Present: Ellen Semonoff, Stephanie Ackert, Jose Soares (recorder)

Presentations:

Susan Richards, the Out of School Time Coordinator for Cambridge's Agenda for Children, talked about the professional development taking place in the City's After School Programs. Currently the Agenda for Children has two initiatives: Literacy and Out of School Time, which is After School for grades K-8. In the After School Programs there has been a concerted effort to improve the quality of the programs and the professional development of the staff. The Agenda for Children has partnerships with the City's Police, the School, and the Public Health Departments and collaborations with various non-profits, community schools, and Youth Centers throughout the City.

The focus for the past nine years has been on building a professional development system in the After School Programs by sharing professional development plans and instituting best practices at all levels of the schools, programs, and non-profits involved. Over the years, given the staff turnover in the field, it has been difficult to sustain good practices.

The components of this initiative include classroom observation, debriefing sessions, the coaching of management practices, and action plan meetings. An outside consultant (coach) works directly on site (75 hours per program) with the teachers' Supervisor, and Program Director. This has led to enhanced academics, homework assistance, more structured programs, and the professionalization of the field staff by bringing in quality control, the implementation of best practices, improved planning, and self assessment tools.

Currently there are six coaches in eighteen programs. These eighteen programs represent 40% of the City's After School Programs. Programs move in and out of this Integrated Self Assessment Support as their capacity improves. Participants are surveyed twice throughout the year. There is also an online survey for 4th graders.

Ellen shared her experience as an observer. Before this initiative, there was enormous amount of down time; time management was sub-par. Not all staff were engaged with the kids. Three months later, staff rearranged the schedule so that kids did not have to wait anymore for activities. Every single staff person was engaged, excited, and participated. The focus was on

engaging and lifting the whole team and improving staff performance, problem solving, and dealing with the non-performers.

Khari Milner, The Cambridge Public Schools Director of Complementary Learning Partnerships, and Susan Richards presented on Middle School initiatives occurring in Cambridge. They have found that it is difficult to get youngsters to respond to surveys about school. What happens outside of school and attitudes about learning will carry throughout high school and may dramatically impact on success throughout life. There is an ongoing focus on instilling a new way of thinking outside of the box by peeling back old ideas about school and what happens in school. The goal of this campaign is to infuse a full range of opportunities for kids and to create a foundation for them to excel academically. Research shows that middle school age is a critical time in kids' lives when they begin to be disinterested learners, to distance themselves from parents, which can lead to being sidetracked in High School.

A Mayor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Middle School Youth was formed in the spring of 2009 and is comprised of school department staff, human service providers, elected officials, middle school families and expert consultants from the Aspire Institute at Wheelock College. The work of the Commission is to identify core objectives and encapsulate a citywide vision and goal to unite city agencies, schools, and community partners to enhance Out of School Time opportunities for middle school youth. This Shared Youth, Shared Strategies approach was adopted by the City Council and the School Committee this fall.

There are 7,000 middle school age kids in Cambridge. Two thirds of middle school youth are not consistently enrolled in Out of School Time programs. Kids spend an average of thirty five hours out of school with choices to make about activities. Eighth grade participation in after school programs decreases with each year. There are not enough programs for middle school age children. The model is to have a center partner with a particular school in the neighborhood. Currently there are three Youth Centers which are serving middle school age children based on this model: the Frisoli Youth Center and the King Open School, the Gately Youth Center and the Peabody School, and the East End House and the Kennedy School. The Gately is the oldest program, in its fourth year, and the kids there are engaged in the design of the program and activities.

Ayse asked what percentage of Cambridge high school kids go to college. The percentage is high, the college graduation percentage is lower. The Cambridge high school rate of graduation is in the 90% compared to 83% nationally.

Through surveys designed by researchers at Wellesley College it was found that kids are not being challenged everyday; however, the interest in academics has improved over the years, and there is a change in the expectation of going to college and having a career. There was a 70% response to the online survey which included fourth and fifth graders. Kids are particularly more

at risk during the summer by not being engaged in activities. Data shows that during the summer, the disengaged kids often forget what they learned in the previous school year.

Ayse recommended the book/tape Outliers by Malcolm Gladwell which suggests that some ethnic groups are more inclined to better performance in Mathematics and academics due to language skills.

The next Human Services Commission meeting will be on November 18th. A representative of the Cambridge Community Foundation will be invited to come and talk about what they are seeing in the community and how they are deciding to allocate money.

Ellen recommended inviting someone from the “Baby University” Council to address issues in the ages 0-8; this Baby U Council is comprised of members of the school department, non-profits, and the Childcare Resource Center.

In response to the polling of the Human Service Commission, all commissioners can meet on Tuesdays. It was decided that starting in January, Commission meetings will be on the fourth Tuesday of the month. By then Christopher Hall will be back on the Commission.

The Human Services Commission is one member short. There will be a recruitment effort to get one more commissioner.