

Kids' Council Retreat Minutes
January 15, 2009
4:00 – 8:00pm

Present: Denise Simmons, Kenneth Reeves, Sam Seidel, Robert Healy, Louis DePasquale, Neal Michaels, Billy Andre, Samuel Gebru, Benjamin Likis, Bridget Rodriguez, Susan Flannery, Betty Bardige, Dennis Keefe, Tina Alu, Andrea Collymore, Carolyn Turk, Ellen Semonoff, Robert Hass, Andrea Kramer, Steven Swanger, John Clifford, Addisalem Agegnehu, Elizabeth Asefa, Nick Bruce, Messeret Grensai, Alex Katz, Pasang Lhamo, Mekides Mezgebou, Robel Phillipos, Eunice Rodriguez, Nankey Tenzin, Mary Wong, Amoretta Morris

Mayor Simmons opens the retreat by welcoming everyone and looks forward to the group's engagement with the planned work for the evening.

Amoretta Morris begins the agenda with a look at where the Council has been, what the Council has accomplished, and steps for the future which include: Out of school time collaboration, community-based juvenile diversion program, mental health issues, Youth Involvement Subcommittee update, Cambridge demographic data, Harlem Children Zone discussion.

Amoretta then lists the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses/challenges for the Council (compiled from staff reports, group interviews, and phone discussions between Amoretta and Council members):

Strengths: committed people with diverse expertise, youth & community involvement, access to data & information;

Opportunities: Cambridge is a resource-rich, progressive community that cares about kids, growing interest in Harlem Children's Zone model;

Weaknesses/Challenges: unknown purpose, limited staff, partnerships not being utilized, economy, external reputation or lack thereof.

Amoretta asks members what they think of the Council's strengths. Nick says bringing together community and elected officials is important. Ken Reeves says strategic decisions could make the Council the link to all agencies working on behalf of youth. Sam Seidel notes that, for the most part, the same people are coming to the various meetings concerning kids. Andrea Kramer remarks that she does not have a good idea of the role of a member of the Council; she comes to learn but feels that she is not giving anything back. Although many people attend the same meetings, some do not and maybe members could all share notes from other organizations at Council meetings. Ellen Semonoff says that there is some distinction between most organizations in that most are led by elected leadership.

Elizabeth suggests the Council revisit the goal per the ordinance to act as a “clearing house.” Billy adds that there should be more long-term partnerships with institutions that are already doing this work.

Reeves notes that there is a lot of science behind the Harlem Children’s Zone. He suggests that the Council find some way to target particular groups of youth in need. Elizabeth says that she would be wary to slash current programs but says the Council does need to be clear on goals and define gaps.

Nick notes that change is hard but the Council needs to consider what it is trying to achieve. Messeret suggests the Council would work more efficiently if it focused on short-term goals and works together. Andrea Collymore notes that the Council is faced with the challenges of working with a diverse community and notes the Council could do much more outreach. Billy suggests the Council focus on a city-wide goal that is well-publicized to the community at-large. Tina Alu says community organizations need to have a voice.

Dennis Keefe says that the Council needs to ask more youth and families what is important to them and take better advantage of the expertise in the room.

Reeves say that the “budget keepers” have the authority to request that all youth initiatives be pushed through the Kids’ Council. He asks if the Council should, indeed, be that group.

Seidel responds that the challenges are that the Council doesn’t have authority over other committees.

----Dinner Break----

Amoretta welcomes back retreat participants with a framework developed by the “Ready for 21” Challenge. Participants break into small groups to fill out the chart from the last slide of the presentation; they were assigned to assess the five following topics within different age groups:

1. Thriving Team Leader: Dennis Keefe
2. Connecting Team Leader: Sam Seidel
3. Working Team Leader: Billy Andre
4. Learning Team Leader: Carolyn Turk
5. Leading Team Leader: Elizabeth Asefa

The groups returned and presented their findings with a color code system--green represents excellent; yellow, average; and red, poor:

Working:

11-19, Green: Youth have the option to work for the Mayor’s Program

20-24, Yellow: Not sure how many go on to succeed beyond high school

Connecting:

0-5, Yellow Plus: Really critical children have support but many parents are stressed and not all those children can be reached

High school-aged, Yellow Minus: There is not a great relationship between students and teachers

Thriving:

11-14, Yellow: Athletics are too competitive, and there are not enough healthy choices

20-24, Yellow/Light Green: Low number matriculate onto college

Learning:

0-5, Yellow: Resources are uneven

6-11, Light Green: 6-8 is the age where kids start to “fall off”

Leading:

11-14, Yellow: Not many programs for civic engagement

20-24, Orange: Disconnect when adjusting to college; many not working, which might lead to crime

Amoretta asks what the Council will need to prove whether or not these perceptions are true. John Clifford says data and Steven Swanger says he wishes there were parents of those who worked directly with kids present.

Amoretta notes that there are some “red” places that just need some improvement. Kramer responds that there are two different Cambridges; so it’s most likely “green” for one group and “red” for another which balances out.

Ben adds that Cambridge is losing residents because they can no longer afford to live in Cambridge—he asks where these former residents would fall.

Amoretta asks the Council where this retreat leads us as we move forward. She asks the group to consider how the Council addresses issues/topics: with a consistent overall approach vs. a shotgun effect. She asks that Council members write down on individual post-it notes two important actions the Council can do to achieve its missions for children and families, and one phrase that describes how the Council should function moving forward.

NEXT STEPS

Amoretta states that the February Council meeting will focus on strategic issues identified at retreat—the Working Group to draft strategic plan as follow up.

CLOSING

Amoretta closes by asking the Council to think about what additional information is needed and to consider the role of the Council in a broader landscape. She then asks Council members to commit to one thing to help make The Kids' Council a powerful force for improving the lives of Cambridge children, youth and families.

Some of the major commitments included: to share more information from other meetings; to get to know and talk with more Council members; to make a concerted effort to attend all Council meetings; to make sure more youth attend Council meetings; to reach out to the kids in most need; to spread word of the Council within communities, particularly Diaspora communities, and to listen and take a more active role in meetings.

Ken asks what will be the process for deciding on the focus of the strategic plan. Mary responds that the past practice for decision making at the Kids' Council has been by vote of the majority. She is open to other suggestions.

Dennis remarks on the retreat as being productive and thanks Amoretta for her facilitation. Everyone joins in on the sentiment and applause.

Retreat concluded at 8pm.