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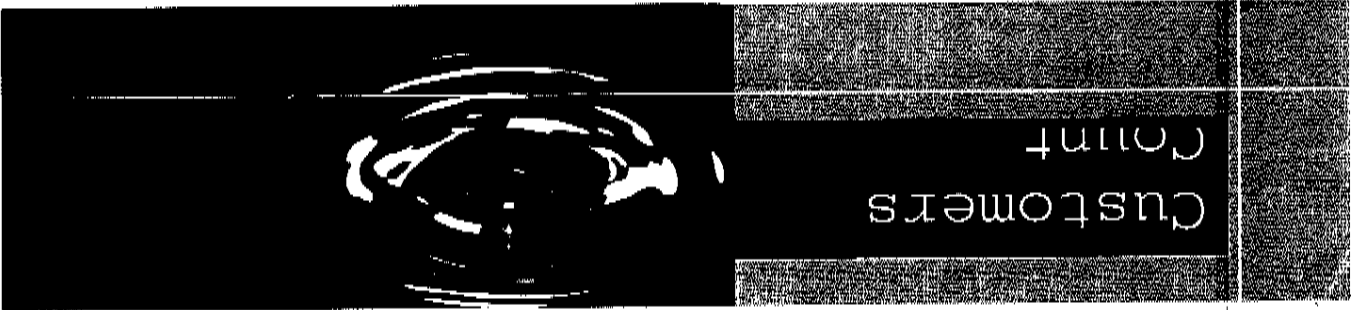
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Shelly Norwood

"Where All Customers Count"

Customers Count, LLC

PRESCOTT UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT SPECIAL NEEDS PARENTS FOCUS GROUP



Desired Outcome: To generate discussion and gather input on a variety of topics related to Prescott Unified School District Special Needs Students from the parent's perspective. Then, to take those findings and present them to the School Board and District Administration to assist them in developing future plans based on real concerns and ideas from those attending the district's schools.

Special Needs Parents Focus Group
November 15, 2007
Report of Findings

Participants

A total of 13 parents participated for a one time, two-hour session of a focus group for Prescott Unified School District in Prescott, Arizona. All participants represented the various age and grade levels presently enrolled in PUSD. Topics were given to the participants several days before the focus group to allow them to gather thoughts on topics to be discussed. These were very generic, so as to allow for spontaneity during the discussion. At the focus group, there was a good representation from different grade levels of gender, academic and physical abilities. The participants included parents with children in elementary, middle and high school. They included parents of children with a wide range of disabilities including, but not limited to, children with severe physical disabilities, autism, terminally-ill, learning disabilities and fetal alcohol/drug syndrome.

Shelly Norwood, facilitator from Customers Count, moderated the focus group on behalf of PUSD. Amy Geissler, employee of Customers Count, took notes of the entire session. One reporter, Sherry L., of the Daily Courier was present, but not permitted to participate. Three parental observers were present, but not permitted to participate, since the panel was full.

Process

After introductions, an overview of ground rules for the discussion and a review of the purpose of the focus group, participants were facilitated through a process during which they discussed the following questions:

1. If you knew someone who had a special needs child and wanted them to attend PUSD, what adjectives would you use to describe it to them? Tell us how the school district feels to you.
2. How do you feel about your participation in the IEP process? Did you understand the process?
3. When your child was evaluated and tested, what were your perceptions of the overall quality of that testing? How does the district rate on their evaluation? Were you able to provide input and have it acted upon?
4. Tell us about the availability of the director, staff and teachers for your concerns and input? What has been your level of satisfaction with the district, administration and teachers?

When asked to talk about how they would describe the special needs' services provided by PUSD to other parents, 11 of 13 described the district as failing their children by a lack of training and understanding of the law regarding the IEP.

"There is clearly a lack of training. It is way beyond sensitivity training. It is more of learning how to deal with their specific behavior issues and meeting their individual needs," said Participant 1. "The director lacks the education she needs. She doesn't know the laws."

"My son is in a typical classroom, but needs the curriculum modified to fit his special needs. When I spoke with Special Ed personnel, I heard many misconceptions regarding the laws," said Participant 7. "On other occasions, I have sat in on other child's IEPs and heard some blatant incorrect things said to parents by Special Ed personnel. You have to understand how this works before you can help us."

"I have a child that came here from Chino Valley. I was really appalled at the procedures here in Prescott," said Participant 8. "When I was questioning what is offered here, I was told by the head of Special Ed that if I didn't like what is offered here, I can always take my child back to Chino Valley. This made me feel really bad."

The summary below represents the collective input from the participants of the Focus Group. The meetings notes are available upon request for a fee. All names have been omitted and replaced with number identifiers for the anonymity of the participants.

Two major themes permeated the focus group discussion. One was a lack of trust for the district administration, excluding the teachers. The other was a high dissatisfaction level with the district's ability to administer and follow the Individualized Evaluation Program for each child. These two issues influenced responses to questions concerning curriculum choices, communication and formation of a parent/administration board. Although parents had children with many different physical and academic needs, the overwhelming majority of the group agreed on the two major themes.

Findings

- The findings in this report reflect the ideas held by a majority of the group.
5. How would you describe the communication between the district and staff with you, at home? How do you feel the district does in explaining the procedural safeguards/options for you to communicate with them? What about information on outside agencies?
 6. What percentage of your child's day do you feel they are engaged and productive? How would you describe the programs offered?
 7. If a group could be put together with parent and administration officials to address special education issues, what would be your thoughts on that?
- All responses were recorded and documented for accuracy of the findings report. For each response, the facilitator asked others on the panel if the statements reflected their beliefs, and if not, how was it different?

was so sad. I have been floored by the lack of support here."

"My son's learning center teacher is wonderful. She sees him on a daily basis, and could see his needs not being met," said Participant 8. "When she was sending messages up the chain of command, she was shot down and told not to accommodate. It

"because they will have heard it."
 "I want to go to the Board with this and then they will be made responsible, shift. I just not viewed as important," said Participant 7. "It requires a paradigm education) is just not viewed as important."

"My child is not disposable and he can learn. It appears to me that this (special available, this brings up huge issues, because this is not true."
 "It is good that we are getting things out in the open so families won't feel so alone. But, there needs to be accountability at the district level. When they say there are no funds available, this brings up huge issues, because this is not true."
 "The district needs to understand that they are being put on notice," said Participant 1.

"I hear of other communities that are doing such great things. We simply get a lot of lip service."
 "This has been fighting more of a political agenda. I have one Special Needs child, one gifted child and one blessedly normal child. I feel like we are at the mercy of a political agenda," said Participant 10.

Participants felt that teachers were doing the best they could, but that personnel at the district level, including the director and superintendent, were not. The parents felt that no one with the authority to make changes listened to their needs and concerns.

"I agree. Our IEP was already filled out before we even got to the evaluation," stated Participant 5. "My daughter is very delayed. Unfortunately, the testing was not individualized at all to accurately address the seriousness of my daughter's condition."

"I asked to have my child tested in her home, because she could count to 20 in the comfort of their home, yet could only count to 6 at school," said Participant 3. "The offer was refused. The IEP is a pre-formatted/computerized program. I was told this made it difficult to make changes."

"There needs to be a modification of the curriculum to fit the individual needs of each child," said Participant 13. "Our child's IEP was only 20 minutes with a Special Ed person, who kept saying they had to get back to class. It's like I'm talking a foreign language to them when asking the curriculum be modified to address my child's individualized needs."

"I have experienced that the district doesn't look at the individual plan," said Participant 2. "They are offering 'one size fits all' solutions. They are not considering the individual need for every child that comes in. My opinion is the district is really failing them."

While explaining their difficulties with the IEP process, the participants felt the IEP given by the school is not truly "individualized." Participants agreed this has contributed to their level of frustration with the district. All were concerned about the lack of academic and behavioral goals not included on the IEP.

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- and needs to be addressed.

• The problems concerning placement of their child in specific schools and/or grades was also widely discussed. All participants agreed the current system of placement is broken

“Initially, I had no idea where to start or how to have our concerns met,” said Participant 10. “Preschool was wonderful. However, kindergarten was completely different. I wanted to hold my child back, but was told it wasn’t an option. The principal and teacher did not have any options to offer me. If I was black, this (placing children in certain schools) would be called segregation. I live one block from Taylor Hicks, and my child is forced to go to Abia Judd.”

“Why does my child have to be in a grade that is not appropriate for his age?” said Participant 4. “This was so difficult. My son had to go from elementary school to high school.”

“I wanted age appropriate curriculum, but they moved by daughter anyways due to her age and physical development,” agreed Participant 12. “Why will the school agree to hold back my normal abilities child, but not my special needs child?”

• As the discussion moved forward to communication and curriculum, the panelists felt the teachers did a good job of communicating between home and school on issues facing their child. Participants did not feel the district was as good at communication about availability of outside agencies and addressing their child’s needs for special classes, therapists and teachers.

“When I asked why his speech ability had gone down, I was told there was no speech teacher, because her credentials had not come through yet. They didn’t even notify us,” said Participant 13. “They went 2 months into the school year. It’s that disconnect that’s huge.”

“I feel like I just landed on Mars. My child needed a behavioral analysis when he was 10 and is now 17,” added Participant 11. “They were finally able to get one by an expert from Flagstaff. He was wonderful. However, the district has not followed up on the plan of action.”

“I would love for Kevin Kapp and the District to just say, “We just don’t know that much about this. It is okay with me that they don’t,” said Participant 10. “I just wish they would be willing to work with us and stop acting like the experts.”

• After talking about the needs for better testing, training and communication, the idea was presented for a parent and administration group that would meet regularly. The panel was split, with no majority, wanting this group. Most expressed the belief that it would not be effective, because of past experiences with the district.

“I think it would be wonderful, but are they going to implement anything the group puts forward? I mean they don’t listen now,” said Participant 5. “I don’t trust they would do anything with what we meet about.”

“Even getting this meeting to happen was a struggle. It is like we don’t even exist,” said Participant 1. “The fact that we have to fight for every thing is what we experience every day. So, we are cautious about forming a group.”

- Use of a mediator to resolve issues.
- Formation of group/phone list to help parents go through the special needs process.
- Bullying policies and safety concerns at all schools.

Additional Recommendations Not Covered in Topic Suggestions

- Better training of the laws and procedures for District staff.
- Hiring of properly trained special needs coaches (behavioral analysts, speech therapists, etc).
- Training included in teacher professional development for special needs for all teachers.

Training

- Better school placement for academic and social needs of special needs children.
- Offering more elective courses, i.e. art, music, for special needs children.
- Offering socialization goals in IEP.
- Including academic goals in IEP.

Curriculum

- Elimination of pre-filled out IEP forms.
- More creative testing procedures.
- Following to the letter what needs are addressed in the IEP.

Individual Evaluation Program

The following recommendations were recommended by participants. They are not listed in any particular order.

Recommendations

"We're very premature to talk about a parent and administration group to talk about change," said Participant 2. "They don't want change. Everything is lip service, as far as I've been able to tell. Even if you got a group together, we don't trust them."

"We should all be starting from the same place," said Participant 11. "They don't let us know each other. We need to be like this now and have power to help each other."

If a group was formed, the parents wanted it to meet monthly, with participants chosen by parents, not the district.