

Starting a Community Dialogue: the Future of Education in Peacham

At the invitation of the School Board, Winton Goodrich of the Vermont School Boards Association came to Peacham Elementary School on January 21, 2007 to moderate a community discussion on the future of education in our town. More than 60 community members attended, including a group of 8 volunteers who helped frame the questions for the afternoon and facilitated the small group discussions. At the end of the session, it was suggested that the summary sheets for the small groups be photographed and made available to the community. These photos are being posted on the website along with this introduction--an explanation of the process that was used, and the meaning of the different colored dots that appear on the summary sheets. No attempt is being made here to interpret the results.

When participants arrived at the school, they were asked to sign in, and each person received a color-coded name tag assigning them randomly to one of six groups. As mentioned above, the facilitators met ahead of time with Winton Goodrich to generate six questions that would form the basis of small group discussions. After a brief introduction, participants divided into their groups, each meeting in a separate room. The six questions were as follows:

1. What is our commitment to public education in Peacham?
2. What does the school provide for the community besides educating the children?
3. What's important in education for elementary children?
4. What options do you suggest for sustaining the school?
5. What about school choice at the elementary level?
6. Should we consider the option of merging with another school district?

In addition to one or more facilitators, each group had a recorder with a flip chart. Ideas and suggestions were summarized and written down without evaluation. Groups had about 45 minutes to complete this process, at the end of which groups were asked to cluster related statements and ideas. Thus, you will see certain statements crossed out-- not because they were discarded, but because they were clustered with similar statements elsewhere on the chart.

Each person was then given three dots (red or yellow) to place on the statements they found most critical or compelling. All the groups then reassembled together, and the flip charts were posted on the wall. Each group facilitator in turn spoke about their group's discussion and clarified any questions. The final step in the process consisted in giving all participants, including facilitators, three green dots to place on any of the collected flip charts. People were allowed to place dots on separate statements, or to aggregate all three dots on one statement. What you see in the photos are hence two stages of "dot placement": the first, in red or yellow, originating within the six individual groups; and the second, in green, indicating the selections of all the participants in the reassembled large group at the end of the day.

At the conclusion of the afternoon, participants had an opportunity to critique the process and make suggestions. A number of people expressed the need for more information about costs and other impacts of the various options discussed. Assembling and discussing this data is the basis for a series of meetings to take place between now and the early fall. Please refer to the attached pages for a schedule of these meetings. Questions and comments may be referred to School Board members:

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