



## Parent Engagement Programs

When parents and schools work together, everybody wins.

### **Report to Tupelo Public School District's Board of Trustees: Tupelo High School's Council of Excellence**

May 7, 2013

Sally Gray, Parents for Public Schools

#### **The Proposal**

In response to a suggestion in the Spring of 2012 by then-Interim Superintendent David Meadows for a "Council of Excellence", Parents for Public Schools submitted a proposal to oversee its development and to facilitate the first year's meetings. A decision was made to launch the first Council of Excellence at Tupelo High School. The Council's mission was "to develop a climate of harmony, understanding, and cooperation among all stakeholders, fostering a positive education and community environment that supports academic success for all Tupelo High School students." The Council was charged with working to strengthen the lines of communication among all key stakeholders for the benefit of THS and its students; gathering information on ways the community can support THS; and serving in an advisory capacity to THS and District administration. The Council was not accorded any decision making authority with regard to school governance.

#### **The Process: Recruiting and Selecting Council of Excellence Members**

Following a meeting between Parents for Public Schools personnel and District representatives during the summer to discuss the Council's role, the recruiting process began in late September of 2012 with information about the Council's creation posted on the school and district websites and an article and editorial in The Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal inviting members of the community to apply. Parents for Public Schools prepared the Frequently Asked Questions, the Application, and the proposed Bylaws for the Council and oversaw

pg. 1





## Parent Engagement Programs

When parents and schools work together, everybody wins.

the application process. The Application deadline was October 19. Applications were submitted directly to the national headquarters of Parents for Public Schools in Jackson to keep the process free of any claims of favoritism. In response to recruiting by Sally Gray, Parent Coach with Parents for Public Schools, and publicity, 34 applications were received. The original plan authorized 14 to 16 members for the Council; the Parents for Public Schools Selection Committee chose 23 community members to serve along with Mr. Jason Harris, Principal, Dr. Matt Dillon, Assistant Superintendent, Teresa Ware as teacher representative, and Mary Ann Plasencia, Community Liaison. Council members were chosen from different elements of the community: THS parents, at least one TMS parent, someone from higher education, members of Tupelo's faith based community, business leaders, students, and at large community members. The Council's makeup included 18 whites, 8 blacks, and one Hispanic. Council Bylaws called for staggered one and two year terms.

### **The Work of the Council**

In accordance with the Council of Excellence Bylaws, the group met four times during the 2012-2013 school year. Meetings were held in the THS Media Center from 7:00-8:15 A.M. to accommodate the schedules of working adults and student members. Prior to 3 of the 4 meetings, Parents for Public Schools' personnel met with THS Principal, Jason Harris, and others to discuss the meeting goals and agenda. Nita Rudy, Program Director, co-facilitated the Council's first two meetings with Sally Gray, Parent Coach. Gray facilitated meetings 3 and 4.

At the Council's first meeting on November 15, ground rules for the work were established, introductions were made, and Bylaws were discussed and approved.





## Parent Engagement Programs

When parents and schools work together, everybody wins.

For the group's second meeting, a data packet for each member was provided by PPS with input from THS. Items included the most recent Children's First Report, district and THS demographic data, results of all Subject Area Tests including disaggregated data, graduation information, SATP2 trend data for the past four years, information on retesters, tutorial opportunities, attendance, discipline referrals for the last 3 years, safety and security enhancements, staff recruiting/retention, and minority hiring.

The third Council meeting included a student member's report on "Talk About It" as well as small group work identifying goals for Tupelo High School. The top five goals identified by the Council:

1. Reduce the dropout rate
2. Increase the graduation rate and the percentage passing state tests
3. Identify the Top 5 schools in the Southeast and visit them
4. (tied with #5) More National Merit Finalists
5. (tied with #4) Modified block system (M,W,F and T, Th)

At its final meeting in late April, the Council heard a report from a member on dual enrollment/dual credit. Mr. Harris and Dr. Dillon offered additional input and answered numerous questions from the members. Feedback Forms were distributed to all members and input was sought on the Council's future topics and recommendations for filling any vacancies on the Council of Excellence.

### Council Members' Feedback

We received feedback forms from 24 of the Council members. Most C of E members commented that they benefited from serving. ("I know much more about THS and have a more positive opinion of the school which I convey to other parents and community members.");

pg. 3





## Parent Engagement Programs

When parents and schools work together, everybody wins.

“good to see community members able to ask questions that might be a little uncomfortable. I think it’s good to be able to address issues and not sugar coat questions or answers.”)

When asked if the Council of Excellence has benefited THS or the community, comments included: “It has given the community a voice and THS an opportunity to tell its own story”; “helps to dispel rumors”; “Gives a knowledgeable voice to groups/associations/churches in the community—turns ‘hearsay’ into ‘knowledgeable opinion’” Others weighed in saying it’s too early to tell if the group has benefited the community and that a mechanism should be in place to help push out information shared in the meetings to the community.

Eighty three percent of the feedback respondents said they had shared information learned in Council sessions with others: church members, parents, co-workers, fellow students, etc.

The respondents were unanimously in favor of continuing the Council of Excellence (and all but two of its members want to continue serving). Seventeen respondents believe other Tupelo schools (or configurations thereof) should have a Council of Excellence or similar advisory group. Six were not sure and one said no.

When asked if their questions or concerns had been adequately addressed by the school or the district, 15 replied yes. A few said they still had issues that had not been addressed. Unfortunately, they did not specify what their “issues” are. Insofar as I am able to determine who has unanswered questions, I will follow up to seek clarification and refer them to Mr. Harris and/or Dr. Dillon.

## Observations and Challenges

Using Parents for Public Schools to oversee this process was beneficial for several reasons: PPS drove the process and invited the public’s





## Parent Engagement Programs

When parents and schools work together, everybody wins.

input; PPS recruited applicants from a broad spectrum of the community; the selection process was free of any favoritism or bias since an outside Selection Committee was used; the facilitators oversaw the agendas and the meetings, inviting input from all members; and PPS was responsive to the Principal's need to inform the members of practical considerations in the day to day operations of THS.

Because this format was new to the district and the Council participants, there were some "growing pains" as we worked through our sessions. Some on the Council understood that they were there to learn about the high school, ask questions about policies, programs, and progress, and then share that with others in the community. Others were anxious to "roll up their sleeves" and take on a task to improve the high school or help THS students and families.

Having 3 students on the Council was tremendously helpful to the group. All three of them offered valuable insights and practical considerations to the group. We intentionally put one student in each of the small groups (and Teresa Ware in the 4<sup>th</sup> small group) at our meetings to bring that "student voice" to the discussions.

The 75 minute meeting format proved somewhat challenging. We met four times, as required by the Bylaws, and a few members made suggestions that we meet longer, stagger meeting times, and/or meet more frequently. The majority felt that focusing on one major topic at future meetings would be preferable to hearing reports on multiple THS programs. They also suggested forming task forces to address particular issues. (This may be outside the scope of the Council's work but there are some enthusiastic participants who are anxious to work for the success of our students in the community.)





## Parent Engagement Programs

When parents and schools work together, everybody wins.

Finding a way to “push out” the Council’s work should be our next goal. Whether that is through the district’s new 30 minute television spots or a video on the district and school websites or through a regular column in the newspaper or Neighbors section penned by rotating Council members, we must find a better way to share the good news of what’s happening at THS.

Another challenge facing the Council will be filling the vacancies. In the initial recruiting, we cast the net broadly looking for applicants. We now have 23 members who want to remain on the Council and only two spots to fill (as well as replacing the 2 seniors). Members themselves submitted multiple recommendations for those vacancies. Decisions must be made whether to keep or replace sitting members and whether to advertise for new members or invite only those who were recommended by sitting members to apply.

PPS would recommend that, should the district choose to continue the Council of Excellence, the latter

1. be renamed to better capture its role (with the new name to be determined by the membership)
2. be reconstituted over the summer (to fill vacancies, etc.)
3. hold an orientation meeting for all members as the school year begins
4. hold meetings more frequently and at staggered times
5. allow for the creation of task forces or subcommittees to support the high school in the community, whether that entails fundraising, mentoring, or other activities
6. find new and innovative ways to inform the broader community of the Council’s work and the progress of Tupelo High School







## Parent Engagement Programs

When parents and schools work together, everybody wins.

7. be expanded to include four student representatives

### PPS Recommendations

- Tupelo High School should continue convening a Council of Excellence to build on the momentum of good will created by the open two-way communication among staff, community and students .
- Establish a similar Council for K-2 and 3-5 configurations to foster stronger communications among all stakeholders and provide additional support for the elementary schools.

### Closing

It has been a pleasure to work with Mr. Harris, Dr. Dillon, Mary Ann Plasencia, Mary Thomas and the entire Council of Excellence membership. Launching the Council of Excellence to further open the lines of communication between the high school and the community was a wise move by the district. When parents and community members can ask hard questions, voice concerns, and receive accurate information about their high school's progress, everyone benefits. We want Tupelo to be that community that truly "wraps its arms around its public schools."

