

Stevens - Reflection: Community-Based Observation

I made the decision to observe the Howard County Parent-Teacher-Student organization's monthly county-wide meeting held at the Howard County Board of Education on November 10, 2014. This was a county-wide PTA meeting in which representatives from each school's individual PTA attended. It also included representatives from both teachers unions as well as the administrators union. New for this meeting was the inclusion of student representatives from the county SGA.

The session was split into three distinct parts. Prior to the official meeting was a focus group meeting on wellness. The discussions during this session revolved around food discussions within the class. This included talk about classroom parties and the food that parents brought in, the food available during school provided meals, the free breakfast bags provided to each classroom, and food provided in after-school or PTA sponsored events.

The second session, and the beginning of the official meeting, involved the PTA leadership updating the members about the budget and upcoming events. They then opened up the floor for questions and comments where the members representing the schools could bring up concerns from their individual PTA associations.

The final portion of the session consisted of two different presentations. The first was by the Mental Health task force for HCPS. They introduced their findings and recommendations that dealt with student mental health. It is important to note that there is a distinction made between mental health and violence/bullying. They are a subset of the Howard County Mental Health Task force that was created after the Columbia Mall shootings. They introduced the Kognito system, an interactive avatar based training for teachers that is being implemented at the

state level. It will introduce them to different scenarios that they might encounter with students as well as teach them how to identify students suffering from different mental health issues. Rather than trying to train teachers how to personally treat mental health issues the goal is to train them how to identify them so they can then be referred for the proper help.

The second presentation was about the TeleHealth system being put in 5 different schools in Howard County. This is a joint program between CareClix, the Howard County Health Department, and the University of Maryland Medical Center. It provides remote monitoring from the nurses office and connects to an emergency pediatric physician at the UMMC hospital in Baltimore City. Each station can have up to 14 different tools to allow on-site diagnosis of many common ailments that come into the school nurse's office. This allows the child to be evaluated by a doctor right away, as well as provides the oversight needed for a school nurse to give more advanced care.

I selected the PTA meeting as my community observation as I felt that as a pre-service teacher my interaction with parents has been very minimal. We are taught that parents are an important aspect of the classroom, and that parental involvement is key. Based on this I felt that it would be beneficial for me to observe what concerns parents have. With the PTA membership (and leadership) being entirely volunteer based, the parents that chose to participate tend to be the most vocal and involved. Those that run for leadership positions are even more involved/invested. At this particular meeting you have a congregation of all of the leaders from each school, so they are the most invested parents within the county. It is also where the larger-picture issues would be discussed.

The first thing I took from this observation is that parents are very passionate about their children. I make a distinction here to separate "children" and "child's education" as it was my

experience that they are not as concerned with the curriculum or the educational side of school as much as they are concerned with the administrative/logistical issues. Parents were more vocal about food allergies, loss of cultural events, and money distribution. In fact, I didn't hear any complaints about the actual educational process throughout the entire meeting.

The second thing that I found interesting was the overwhelming support that all the parents had for their teachers. While there was a very strong feeling of mistrust and even outright anger towards school and county administration, the parents appeared to recognize that the teachers were not the ones to blame for policy changes that were implemented. Many parents even sympathized with the difficulty teachers have in adapting to many of the changes and discussed ways of helping the teachers in the classroom.

During the observations I wrote down two things that really made me begin to think about the PTSA organization and the parents. One thought was "Parents are acting the same in this meeting as children do in a classroom". Parents were interrupting speakers, talking amongst themselves, interrupting each other, and yelling out instead of waiting to be called on. It reminded me of a classroom with poor management. I feel like any of these parents who saw a classroom that looked like this would take issue with both the student behavior as well as the teachers lack of control. My second thought was "I feel like the PTSA meetings are a way to give opinionated parents a vehicle to complain and/or feel important." After listening to the PTSA leadership talk about the recommendations they put to the board, and how the board made their own decisions, I realized that the PTSA has no actual power. By not having their county president represented on the Board of Education, they are viewed as a volunteer bunch of moms and dads. During a discussion with the county PTSA president after the meeting she expressed her frustration with this exact problem. She felt that the board and/or school administration don't

take her seriously because she is “just a mom.” This was somewhat reflected as well in my discussions with the Board of Education Chairperson after the meetings. The problem I identified is one of scale. The Board is responsible for all the students and staff within the county, school administrations are responsible for all the students in their school, and teachers are responsible for all the students in their classrooms. Parents, on the other hand, are responsible for their student, and whether intentionally or not, their mindset in these meetings reflects the natural need to put their children before other children.

This leads to the biggest lesson I learned from this observation: Parents, regardless of their good (or bad) intentions, ultimately are concerned with only their student. As a teacher, when reaching out to parents, I have to be sensitive to the emotions that surround the parent-student-teacher-classroom relationship and be careful not to present my problems or discussions in a way that belittles the individual importance of the student in their parent’s perception.