

# Some Frequently Asked Questions about the Healey School

OneVille Project    www.OneVille.org    (617) 299-9308    May 27, 2010

The OneVille project has been supporting dialogue about the future of the Healey School in Somerville. Many Healey parents have told us that they quickly need some basic questions about their school answered before they can really talk about the future of the school.

In the spirit of improving communications between school and home, we gathered questions that parents had asked at our forums. We brought these basic questions to Mr. Sabin, the principal of the Healey School, at a recent Multilingual Coffee Hour and taped the conversation with participants' permission, so we could share the information with other parents.

Here are the responses from Mr. Sabin, along with some other voices of parents discussing the same issues at other parent dialogues attended by or sponsored by OneVille. We hope this helps.

## **Question: What are the four programs at the Healey?**

**Mr. Sabin's answer:** We say there are four programs at the school:

- *Middle grades:* the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades
- *Choice Program,* Kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade
- *Learning Disabilities Program:* A small three classroom learning disabilities program that has multi-grade classes and a total of 36 students.
- *Neighborhood Program:* Then there is what's referred to as the "Neighborhood Program," but on the registration this looks like the Healey's "regular" education program.

The school operates as four units. Each [program] has a teacher leader that sits on our leadership teams. Each program has its own efforts to improve itself internally and then it's also part of the whole.

## **Question: What IS the difference between the four programs?**

**Mr. Sabin's answer:** The differences between the programs, that's just simply not an easy thing to answer. Some of them are clearly different.

*The Learning Disabilities Program* is designed to meet a level of special needs that's a little higher than for students who are in larger classrooms. It has a different registration process. There are a different IEP set of needs that students have. (*note from OneVille: an "Individualized Education Plan" is the official document listing a child's Special Education services.*) They receive a higher level of attention from adults, in that there are two adults --- a teacher and a para-professional--- in a class of 12 or fewer students. But the curriculum is similar to other programs, though it's modified.

*The Middle Grade Program* obviously is the older students and it is a 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum.

*The differences between the Choice and Neighborhood [Programs]* can be endlessly debated. In terms of philosophy, that's very complex, because the *Choice Program* has a stated philosophy, which is not implemented completely consistently. . . It does have a longstanding philosophy of what you can call progressive or developmental or experiential learning.

*The Choice mission statement reads, according to a Choice program survey:*

*As a program within the Somerville school system, the Choice Program represents a philosophy of community, collaboration, and innovation. We believe children learn best when they are actively engaged in the process of their own learning. The aim is to develop children's critical thinking and problem-solving skills in a collaborative, multi-dimensional, inter-disciplinary way.*

**Mr. Sabin's answer, continued: The *Neighborhood Program*,** for many, has just been a Somerville school. It does not have a stated philosophy, just as most of the other [Somerville] schools don't have a stated philosophy and have never been asked to have a stated philosophy. . . [In the Neighborhood program, what you see implemented is also varied, as it is in the Choice program.

It is very complex to compare [the Choice and Neighborhood Programs]... I think if you looked 30 years ago when the Choice Program was founded, there would be clear, glaring differences in practice in the two rooms. . . My understanding was it was a much more traditional approach in most classrooms in Somerville, probably very teacher directed, and Choice was very different than that. [Now], that is *not* the case.”

**Question: Is there a different kind of TEACHING in the Choice program than the Neighborhood program?**

**Mr. Sabin's answer:** For example, we took a tour yesterday through six 3-4<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms. One of the classrooms was in rows; that was a Choice classroom. In the other five classrooms --- two of which were Neighborhood, three of which were Choice --- children were [seated] in groups. Does that mean the Choice program believes in rows? No, it means that day the teacher was doing an activity that required rows.

I think the Choice philosophy is a very positive thing. What's happening in the Neighborhood program is in many ways similar. Not because it's imitating the Choice program explicitly; because it's the way most parents and teachers want kids to be engaged and actively involved. That's what's happening in many, many places in the school.

There is another difference in that the student populations are different. That is not in the Program designs. That somehow sorts itself out in the registration process. Clearly, statistically, the [children in the] Neighborhood Program [come from families living with] lower incomes than the Choice program. [However], that is not a blanket statement. There is diversity of all kinds within both programs. Clearly there is a difference in the “demographics.” When the group toured the rooms yesterday that's also very obvious . . .when you look in at the rooms.

Is there a different kind of teaching in the Choice program than in the Neighborhood program? People want simpler explanations than I'm able to give. There's a certain type of teaching

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encouraged in the Choice program. All people in the Choice program know that it's not implemented 100%. That may be good or bad, because some kids have needs that require different types of structure or different types of settings that may exist within the Choice program as well. Choice has a certain philosophy of teaching.

Neighborhood has a philosophy of trying to use best practices, learn about them and implement them. Many of those [practices] overlap with [the practices] in the Choice Program. Some of them might be different. Some of them might be different in a good way, some of them might be different in a bad way. But I don't think you can say in a blanket way that the teaching is different.

If you just videotaped the teachers, I don't think it would be clear that this set of teachers is Neighborhood and that set of teachers is Choice. You might be able to identify [teachers as being in one program or the other] in some cases, but not across the board. It's not a case of very consistent practices in one program and a different set of very consistent practices in another.

**At a OneVille parent focus group at the Mystic Activity Center on May 17**, one Mystic resident who was moving her children from Neighborhood to Choice stated her perspective that Choice was "a hands on learning program instead of books. They'll go a little more into it if a kid has a problem. . . [the other] one of the classes is based on doing work and taking a test."

**At a school-sponsored dialogue May 13 at the Mystic Learning Center**, teachers, a Mystic Learning Center representative, about 10 parents with children in Choice, Neighborhood and Special Needs programs, and the Healey principal talked animatedly for more than an hour and a half.

Some Choice and non-Choice parents said that the Choice program was for kids who like "less structure" and the Neighborhood for kids who like "more structure." As the conversation continued, however, parents noted repeatedly that different teachers and kids within each program had different "styles." Parents told stories of matching individual kids with individual teachers within the Choice program, and occasionally switching programs (always from Neighborhood to Choice) to find a better match. One teacher present said he taught a more "structured" class in the Choice program than his grade's other Choice teacher, who was "more creative." Another teacher added, "And depending on the subject at hand, the same kid has a different learning style!"

**In small and then large-group discussion at a Choice council meeting on May 11**, parents debated Choice program habits of "parent involvement" and then talked about what parents didn't want to lose from the Choice program: parent relationships, participation, power, and input. Parents voiced fears that if "things change," "parent participation" and voice would not be encouraged. Finally, parents expressed fears that a new school remade primarily by administrators would not give parents the "freedom to innovate." Others stated their sense of the program's commitment first to "progressive education," in "not teaching everyone the same thing at the same time," in a "power shift from teachers to parents and kids, too," and of a basic program support for "school choice."

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At a OneVille Healey Parent Forum held at the Mystic Learning Activity Center on 1 May with about 25 people attending, two participants offered their opinion about the differences in teaching:

- "When I asked about the [Choice] program and what their intentions were when they started -- the Choice Program -- they had a lot of project based learning, a lot of hands on learning, field trip learning -- not typical for the traditional program at the time -- that was 27, 28 years ago. And I think a lot of educational philosophy has changed. Teachers coming out of teaching college now have that same philosophy. I don't know if the Choice is cutting edge the way it was at any point. If they want to continue on and pursue other cutting edge education and bring it back to the Healey, that would be great, for all of us to benefit from that. But I think we need to remember that every child has an equal opportunity." (*White community member and teacher*)
- "My question was -- what's the difference between the programs? Because I can say -- I have children in both Choice and Neighborhood. My baby's teacher -- I had the opportunity to move him to Choice, but I didn't. Because I didn't see the difference. Because his teacher is a really good teacher. He's very comfortable in her class. And then in that same hallway, all the children communicate. My son knows the children that are in the Choice program. And vice versa. So I didn't see to move him." "When I saw [Neighborhood teacher] on the floor -- same way that [my son] had a Choice teacher, she was on the floor teaching math. What's the difference?" Both are "really good teachers." (*Black parent with children in both Neighborhood and Choice programs*)

## **Q: When they get to middle school, how does it work? Do the Neighborhood or Choice kids seem to have had a different education from one another?**

**Mr. Sabin's answer:** Neither program is consistent enough for us to be able to say that [Neighborhood or Choice youth seem to have had a different education from one another]. Because, depending on the pathway you've taken through the Choice program, you may have a different experience. And there have been a lot of changes in the Neighborhood program, so I think that's hard to generalize. If we look at our top performing students. . . straight A students at proficient and advanced MCAS, and they come from both programs. If you . . . look at low performing students, they come from both programs.

The biggest challenge though is just . . . many of our students are arriving in the middle grades not prepared for the level of work that's needed. That is just the basic problem. . . happening in both [the Choice and the Neighborhood] programs. It is a school wide problem that makes it very, very difficult to be appropriately rigorous and demanding in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. It is probably the single biggest problem facing the school: too many kids arrive at the end of 6<sup>th</sup> grade significantly behind where we need them to be.

Therefore, everyone's concerns about the level of instruction in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade are valid and shared by the teachers. If students are too far behind entering 7<sup>th</sup> grade, it's a very, very difficult task to teach the way we would want and to have the [educational] experiences we would want. But, I would not blame the [middle school] program for that, because all of our data shows that there are unprepared and prepared students coming from both [the Choice and Neighborhood programs into the Middle School program].

**Q: Why did most of the Choice program children leave the school before 7th and 8th grade, before this past year?**

**Mr. Sabin's answer:** "Well, I wasn't here so I don't really know. But clearly there just wasn't a trust that the experience would be good enough in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Some of that may have been public relations issues and some of that may have been quality of instruction or quality of preparation."

An answer might be better given [by asking the question], "Why did so many people stay last year?" I think it's because a lot of the parents and teachers and administrators worked together to try to create a new middle grade program that built on the strengths of both the Choice program and the whole school K to 6 [Neighborhood program]. People were willing to take a chance that things were going to be a lot better. They *are* a lot better and they need to continue improving. Every year, every parent makes their own judgment . . . as to "How much am I part of the improvement process and change?" and "Have things become good enough yet?" The school needs to reach the point where that flips, and [Healey Middle School program] is the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade program that people want to be part of. We haven't quite reached that point, but we've made significant strides in the past year. Hopefully, that will continue.

At the May 13 dialogue at the Mystic Learning Center, one mom with a child attending the middle school after the Choice Program reported that, "The teachers are superb."

**Q: Enrollment: What's the process for getting admitted to the Choice program? Is there any racial or economic balancing? A number of Latino parents, as well as parents from the Mystic, said that they were not made aware of the program when they were registering their children --- why do you think this is happening?**

**Mr. Sabin's answer:** I've never registered someone [personally], but [the process is that parents enter their child] into a lottery and if there are too many families registered for the Choice program, then registration is randomly selected, unless the child has a sibling in the program in which case the child is automatically in. I believe there is no racial or economic balancing in Somerville.

In terms of informing people of the Choice program, this is a really interesting question. There clearly are some outreach efforts being made by Choice parents, and the practice of the registrar going to preschool meetings --- other schools really don't do that [kind of] trying to reach out. No one really knows what happens at PIC [*Parent Information Center*] when families go in there and who [staff at the PIC] tell to register, one place or another. It's a little mysterious. Only parents who have gone [to the PIC] know, and then you only know how you were treated and not another family, so who [really] knows?

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Let's say your child's having a bad experience in a class, and you say to the administration, my child can't stay in this class anymore. But, you've never even heard of the Choice program. And you say, "Can we switch to another class?" Parents ask that question in schools all the time. We say, "Well, we have another 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class. It's not in the Neighborhood program, it's in the Choice program." [If you want to transfer your child to the Choice program, then,] you would have to go to the PIC, the Parent Information Center, and fill out this paper. If you do, your child could be transferred. We recommend it, but we can't move a child without a parent going to the Parent Information Center and registering. I don't know whether you'd phrase that as a "choice."

Likewise, a child moves into the neighborhood and the Neighborhood [program] class is full. Our Neighborhood program 3<sup>rd</sup> grade has 24 kids in it right now. There's no space. [When a] new 3<sup>rd</sup> grader moves into town and [the family has] no car [and] lives one block away, [the parents of the new 3<sup>rd</sup> grader] come to the PIC and say, "We want [our child] to go to the Healey School. It's our neighborhood school." Great. But the Choice program's the only place where there's space. Sure, I'll register [the new child in the Choice program].

I think the effort's being made, particularly by the Choice program, to recruit people. At the same time, I've gone to a couple of those [recruitment] events and the [parent] attendance is extremely low. So I think if you looked across the city, [the] percentage of parents who [have a child going] into kindergarten who actually attend one of those [recruitment events]. . . would be way below 50%. So the real interaction on recruitment is in two places. Informally in people's neighborhoods, playgrounds, back steps and so on is one big place. The interaction at PIC when [parents] register [is the other]. More than the recruitment meetings, those are the two main places. And what happens in those places is very complicated. And [that is] how people sort themselves out in [the Choice and Neighborhood programs] in confusing ways.

At the **May 13 school-sponsored parent dialogue at the Mystic Learning Center**, a parent noted that school choice in Somerville is not truly a situation of "free choice" if you don't have a car, or if you haven't been offered clear information about all of the programs available (this point has been made in many OneVille coffee hours and forums as well).

In an interesting exchange, one white mother from the Mystic Development said she had been told nothing about the Choice program at the Parent Information Center when she registered for the Healey School. A white middle-class mother reported that conversely, when she went to register her son for preschool and said her older daughter was at the Healey, the registrar said, "oh, Choice?"

Parents from the Neighborhood program, particularly immigrants, have reported to us that they had heard nothing of the Choice program as an option for their children (one Haitian mom at the Healey asked, "what is Choice?"), but said that they would have chosen it if they had heard it was "better." One Latina immigrant parent had chosen the program because she had heard it was "better."

**Q on Field Trips: Several parents raised issues of field trips that end up being mostly Choice or Choice-only – local field trips and particularly, Nature’s Classroom. Is the invitation to “Neighborhood” extended and rejected? Not extended?**

**Mr. Sabin’s answer:** “Nature’s Classroom has been a big controversy in the school for many, many years, because it’s a wonderful trip and the Choice program has had it as a big part of the program for many, many years. And then nothing comparable has existed in the Neighborhood program, [so] the issue always comes up: “Why not?” or “Whose responsibility is it to create that?” There’s been a lot of debate. . . that luckily I haven’t had to participate in.

With the idea of four strong programs and one strong school, we’ve had the policy in the last two years that everything does not need to be identical [in the four programs], but it does need to be more equitable. And, all kids need things to look forward to. So we’ve had over the last couple of years some things that are Choice only, some things that are Neighborhood only. Both programs, I think, have an obligation to make sure the Learning Disability students are included, although the Neighborhood program has taken that responsibility more.

The Neighborhood program has had at least two Neighborhood-only trips. The entire Neighborhood program went apple picking in the fall. Then there was a Museum of Science Neighborhood overnight. That is part of how the Neighborhood program is working on its own efforts to solidify its identity as a separate program and not just be a “non-Choice” program, but to be assertively established as a program in its own right.

So if the structure of the school were to remain the same [through the upcoming June School Committee decision], discussions would have to take place as to which things are across the whole school --- like field day --- and which things are only in one classroom and which things are only in one program. That’s complicated because of course then everyone has to decide [that the decisions made about field trips and events are] equitable enough [across the four Healey programs].

There are also sometimes communication problems that lead to misunderstandings. Everything that happens inside the school is for everyone, basically, unless it’s a classroom event. But sometimes communication can make it seem that it isn’t. So when the purple calendar goes out, if it doesn’t specify a program-only thing, then it’s for [all four school programs]. The star-gazing party is an example [of how miscommunication happens]. That was for everyone, was organized for everyone. Then a lot of word came to me that some kids got specific invitations, if they were in the Choice program, and some didn’t. And the idea [began to circulate informally] that [the star-gazing event] was only for the Choice program. But the organizers last year and this year, clearly organized it for everyone and the whole purple calendar said that. What I think happened is that someone, a helpful teacher or a helpful parent, made an extra set of copies of a flier and put them in the Choice classroom box, not intending to exclude anyone, but as a reminder. That this is the only thing I can assume happened, because I heard from people that a flier went home in Choice classrooms, not Neighborhood. I didn’t put out a flier, because it was on the purple calendar and that informed everyone. But somehow a message got out that non-choice program students weren’t invited. That event is just an example of one that was for everyone from its initial conception and through a

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misunderstanding ended up becoming a controversy. Sometimes things that look like negatives aren't. That [stargazing event] was planned by some Choice parents, I think. I don't know if that [event] was funded by choice or the PTA, but it was clearly for everyone. Then there was a communication breakdown that led to some hurt feelings.

The school development committee has been working on an idea of what is an acceptable amount of experiential learning for a classroom and how we can make sure that every kid in the school has a certain number of these type of experiences every year, which could be enrichment assemblies and/or field trips. Then, we need the money to fund it. That hasn't really reached a resolution point, but that seems a logical way to think about this. And [the experiential learning] does not have to be identical [across the four programs].

## **Q: What is the process of determining the Healey's future?**

*Since the multilingual coffee hour, the school committee has clarified the process, so below, we have both Mr. Sabin's answer, several options suggested on a recent Choice parents survey and the updated School Committee explanation for the process of determining the future of the Healey School.*

**Mr. Sabin's answer:** The categories [for the structure of the Healey School under consideration by the School Committee] are fairly obvious:

1. You could make one school with one identity, and of course what that school [would be] like has to be determined.
2. You could make two separate schools with two separate identities, but the identities of those schools would need to be determined.
3. Or you could maintain multiple programs as we have now. Then, the nature of each of those programs and how they work together would have to be included and continue to be more clearly defined. I can't think of any other options than that. One school, three schools, multiple programs in one school, those...those seem to be the categories of options and each of them could go in different directions, depending on how they were planned."

**Mr. Sabin's answer continued:** My view of how this has to happen is that the school committee is going to just balance the big picture of what's possible: what are the strengths of each, what are the risks, and what is possible, financially or logistically. Then, once [one of the options is selected for the Healey School by the School Committee] --- and it will be a difficult decision --- a large design team, led by the new principal, will work for an entire year to design the new program. If [the decision is to make the Healey into] two schools, there will be two design teams. If it is one school, one design team. I think that's the only way this can happen.

[A recent] faculty vote that showed that [faculty] were favoring one program [the single Healey school option that combines the Choice and Neighborhood programs]. I think the only way to interpret that is that the faculty has been working together very closely, and therefore they want to continue doing that. [The faculty are] not [making] some great ideological statement. It's a statement that [expresses something like the following]: "You know what? We used to not get along. And now we do. And we work together and we learn together and we want to keep doing that." I

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wouldn't weigh [the faculty vote in] too heavily as any great statement of this option is better than that option. It's [more the expression that] a good thing cause the faculty is learning and working together.

I think the [real] step forward will be when there is a decision made for any of the options and the design process happens, because deciding is painful. Designing is exciting. And so it will change from anxiety to excitement once the threshold is crossed from the vote to the planning. If the new principal can lead a planning process instead of [being involved in the painful decision], I think everyone's spirits will feel better. Whatever option is chosen, some people are going to choose to leave [the Healey], and some people are going to choose to join [in] and be part of [the new future of the Healey School]. And that's always the case with any change.

**A recent survey, distributed last week by Choice program parents for Choice program parents**, was put online and advertised via the Choice program listserve, which many [but not all] Choice parents belong to. It also went out on paper. Some volunteer Choice parents talked to other parents whom they thought might not have internet and some volunteer Choice parents reached out to parents with Spanish surnames who might wish an explanation of the survey in Spanish, as well as English. **The parent survey described several additional "options."**

- "The Choice Program and the Neighborhood Program continue as stand-alone programs within the Healey School, except (1) a second strand would be added to the neighborhood program so it (like the Choice Program) would have two classrooms per grade, and (2) the administration would develop a strong identity for the neighborhood program so that both it and the Choice Program would have strong distinct identities.
- "Same as . . . above, except each program would have its own principal.
- "The Choice Program continues as a stand-alone program relocated to its own building (not the Healey School).
- "The Choice Program and the Neighborhood Program merge, with many Choice elements promised to be retained: project-based learning, Nature's Classroom/offsite learning, looping and mixed grades, parental involvement in the classroom and in governance, parental involvement in the hiring of teachers, and a citywide opt-in opportunity for families.
- "The Choice Program and the Neighborhood Program merge, with the administration and School Committee deciding next year which Choice elements to retain."

**Mark Niedergang, chair of the School Committee, offered these answers about the School Committee's public process via email:**

**How long will the public-input part of the two meetings go?** Discussion groups on Monday 24 May will be 30-45 minutes depending upon time and desire of groups. At the 1 June Public Hearing, the public input will last as long as necessary with a maximum of 2 minutes per speaker.

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**Do you have to sign up in advance in order to speak at the 1 June Public Hearing?** There will be a sign-up sheet and people can sign in to speak at any point during the evening and will be called upon to speak.

**Will you make translators available at the 24 May and 1 June School Committee meeting and hearing?** Yes.

See the following School Committee Healey Timeline (public document issued by the School Committee).

(this is a copy of the public document distributed by the school committee)

**Revised Timeline for School Committee  
Decision-Making Process on  
The Future of the Healey School**

**Monday, May 24, 6:30 PM at Healey School Cafetorium -- School Committee Long Range Planning meeting** Presentation of the three options to the School Committee from instructional and organizational points of view. Updates from Healey School groups. Discussion groups facilitated by School Committee members to hear from the public.

**Tuesday June 1, 6:30 PM at Healey School Cafetorium -- Public hearing on the Future of the Healey School** Superintendent makes his recommendation to the School Committee, followed by questions and discussion by School Committee. Any member of the public who wishes to speak will have an opportunity to do so. Each speaker will be given a maximum of two minutes. (No elementary school students will be permitted to speak.)

**Monday, June 21 (or Wednesday June 23)**

School Committee Long Range Planning meeting to discuss the future of the Healey School

**Monday, June 28**

Final scheduled School Committee meeting of the 2009-2010 school year

**Wednesday, June 30**

Deadline for School Committee decision on the future of the Healey School