

## Parent Forum held at the Mystic Activity Center, Saturday 1 May 2010

Changes are happening at the Healey, and this is an important time to seek out and carefully listen for parent opinion. A new principal, Jason DeFalco, arrives at the Healey School on 1 July 2010. Important decisions about the structure of the Healey School are being considered by the School Committee this month.

Twenty parents and community members came together with Spanish, Krèyol and Portuguese translators to discuss the future of the Healey for three hours at the Mystic Activity Center on Saturday 1 May 2010 over a homemade meal. The meeting was friendly and comments seemed frank and sincere. Parents took full advantage of what they expressed was a rare opportunity to talk across lines of Healey programs, race, class, and language; they noted that many misconceptions they had about one another were raised and discussed. After an introduction activity that had us declaring roots from across the country and world, we mused about the absence of parents with long generational roots in Somerville. Several noted that the forum would have been made even better by a stronger showing of parents whose children attended only the Neighborhood program (many parents in attendance had children in both the Choice *and* Neighborhood programs).

Parents offered opinions about the kind of school they wanted. At the same time, they expressed confusion about the difference between the Healey's programs, and concerns about an uncertain future for the school and the impact of this moment's instability on children. Three issues that generated spirited and varied responses were:

- parent involvement and outreach opportunities that increase children's academic success;
- access to activities and field trips across programs along with the parent resources required to make them happen, and
- teaching an array of skills that children now need to handle diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century environments, especially communication skills and the capacity to speak a second language.

The meeting ended with a straw poll about the three options for the Healey School that stirred strong emotions among participants. A large majority of participants felt the options to either maintain and/or combine the Choice and Neighborhood programs would benefit children most. Only one participant chose having a separate school for the Choice program as one of the two options marked on their poll. Most participants felt they could not be *sure* about which option was best for children until they had more particulars about *how* the Choice and Neighborhood would be blended and whether or not some important practices in the Choice Program would be maintained after the merge.

Key questions raised at this parent forum were passed on to the Healey's principal, Mr. Sabin, who answered them by invitation at the OneVille bi-monthly Multilingual Parents' Coffee Hour held on Friday, 7 May 2010.

As parents and community members entered the 1 May 2010 Parent Forum held at the Mystic Activity Center, they were asked to put dots on their nametags, to signify how many children they had and which of Healey's four programs their children were enrolled in. We began with introductions and a "Who's in the House?" activity. We shared the places where we were born and even our favorite breakfast foods. (Coffee won!). As it happened, not one person present had been born in Somerville. We had been born across the rest of the country and world (South America,

Central America, the Caribbean, the Boston area, and “the rest of the U.S.”). Everyone stood up with our final “who’s in the house” question: “stand up if you want to make the Healey a better school and Somerville a better place for kids.” We all felt the need for more Somerville-born residents and more Neighborhood program parents in the dialogue.

Because many parents have told us they do not understand the program layout at their school, we briefly described the four existing programs at the Healey (“Choice,” “Neighborhood,” “Special Education,” “middle school.”) We then described the “3 options” the school committee is debating for the Healey’s future: keeping the four programs separate, combining the Choice and Neighborhood programs, and moving Choice to a separate building.

We then said that we felt that we couldn’t engage these “options” without first discussing our thoughts about education. Participants broke up into small groups to discuss several general questions about what people expected from their school and specific things they wanted to keep and change about their children’s education at the Healey:

1. What do you expect a school to do? What questions do you have about this school?
2. What do you like about the Healey? What do you want to change about the Healey?

These questions really got people talking in their small groups for over an hour. We then spent another forty-five minutes sharing key points in the large group discussion that followed.

Parents spoke positively about their commitment to the schools and their children’s education, even when they made critical comments about the need for improvement. Excitement about envisioning the future was high. In fact, parents stayed beyond the 4:00 end time debating next steps for the school!

In the 1 May Parent Forum, participants raised specific points that are sometimes paraphrased and sometimes quoted below. Their commentary is loosely grouped by theme below (sometimes accompanied by OneVille team suggestions for future forums). Direct quotes and longer narrative quotes (transcribed from tape recordings) that we felt were important to share in full are set apart in quotation marks (“ ”).

**Many parents appreciate a school that creates an emotionally and physically safe environment for children. The comments that follow begin to point toward the beginnings of specific expectations for the Healey that could be added to in future parent forums.**

- “I want a school setting to be safe, for my child to voice his opinion and to be encouraged to voice his opinion. [My child] questions himself a lot. He is not sure of himself. Physical safety, emotional safety.” *Presently a Mystic choice parent for her third child but formerly had two children in the Healey neighborhood program*
- Wants children to feel safe, comfortable with teachers. Parents need to feel comfortable too!
- Wants school to be a safe place for the child to explore; and wants child to be socially safe (not picked on). *White community member*

**Most parents ask for access to teachers, and good communication between school and home.**

- "When I brought my children there -- we had come from Boston -- the building itself was like, 'wow.' The first person we met was Mr. Sabin. And then we met a parent from the Choice program. She showed us around. She showed us Neighborhood and Choice. We had access to a Neighborhood teacher, and access to a Choice teacher." *Black parent with children in both Neighborhood and Choice*
- Wants email/phone access to teacher. *Black parent with children in both Neighborhood and Choice*
- Wants to be able to meet w/ teachers before and after school. *Black parent with children in both Neighborhood and Choice*
- Wants the school to be more involved with the parents -- to communicate in and out with the parents. *Haitian community member*
- The school has to have parents' actual home address, as well as Twitter, Facebook, email, to communicate. *Haitian community member*

**Parents expect teachers to attend carefully to children's learning. To some parents, respecting and responding to each child as an individual with his or her own learning style is important. All want their children to be highly skilled. Some strategies that parents identify helping with this are the multi-grade classrooms in Choice, experiential hands-on learning, integrating learning into projects, lower teacher-to-student ratios, and supports for parents who struggle to help their children complete homework.**

- "One, to understand that my child is an individual and he learns differently. To respect my child's different learning style and to incorporate that into a classroom." *Presently a Mystic Choice parent for her third child but formerly had two children in the Healey neighborhood program*
- "Understanding a child is an individual and that kids have different ways of learning, a school needs to learn ways to accommodate different learning styles. All teachers should be encouraged to create that kind of classroom." *White parent with two bicultural children in the Choice program*
- "Include everyone. Choice includes children who are a little advanced to help out others. The multi-grade classroom works." *White parent with two bicultural children in the Choice program*
- "Making [children] interested in learning is all about experiential learning, hands-on learning, multisensory learning. You are not just learning math when you are sitting down with the times tables, you are learning it when you are cooking. Integrated learning." *White parent with two bicultural children in the Choice program*
- Teachers should keep kids' love of learning. *Black parent with children in both Choice and Neighborhood*
- Wants teacher to instill curiosity in the child. *White Choice parent*
- "I want my children to learn to love to learn which is happening great for my daughter, but not for my son." *White parent with two bicultural children in the choice program*

- “I want my son to learn and not know he is learning. To enjoy it and actually have fun with it. Some days he really does come home and be excited about school.” *Presently a Mystic Choice parent for her third child but formerly had two children in the Healey neighborhood program*
- One parent believes her child has had a very positive experience in the Neighborhood program. She wants her daughter to learn and progress. *Latina parent with children in the Neighborhood program*
- Homework is complicated. Parent doesn’t know how to solve the problems or help the kid. The kid is not paying the right attention and is not motivated because the teacher does not check the homework. *Latina parent with children in both the Choice and Neighborhood programs*
- One parent lived in Lawrence before and thinks her child is getting better at Healey. Math was not good in Lawrence. The teaching is different compared to Lawrence. The teachers complained about her daughter in Lawrence but not at Healey. *Latina parent who has had a child at the Healey for the past two years*
- Ratio of students to teacher is not balanced. There are too many kids with one teacher. When students finish homework they are just hanging around. *Latina parent*
- Teachers need extra help or the classroom groups need to be made smaller.

**One parent had the courage to raise the issue of school performance challenges that exist within all the programs at the Healey. This issue needs to be better defined --- at other forums, parents seemed to have contradictory understandings --- and addressed in future forums.**

- “One of the things on the list [generated at the Choice Parent Council Meeting] that came up was first of all, ok, was the list of current issues right now and especially the students’ subpar performance. We need to get the students out of corrective action. How will each of the options do this. It’s across all the programs.” (Choice parent)

**In schools, many parents ask that their teacher and children have the necessary skills to take part in a diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century global community. Specific education strategies mentioned for children are: having diverse friends; learning a wide array of “old” and “new” basic communication skills; and developing a flexible communication style that enable them to be good citizens in a complex and communicative world. Several parents emphasized that communication skills must be taught and reinforced not only in classrooms, but in the lunchroom and playroom at the school as well.**

- "There was one girl I spoke to who was in the Choice program the whole way through. - Now she knows other kids in 7/8th grade. She was kind of disappointed that she'd never met the other friends. Now that she has a big group of friends, she's like, 'why couldn't I get to know them' before?" *White community member*
- “I want my children to learn to be good citizens and members of the community. Learning how to communicate, how to talk about things, how to face conflict. Especially now in a diverse world, kids need to learn good social skills. Please, Thank you, manners. Good

listening. Being respectful of people who are different than me. *Parent with two children in the choice program*

- “My kids are Asian in a white family. I am trying to keep them connected. It is hard. . .They get questions everyday about who is their family, who is their sister and about only having mothers. We’ve been lucky in Choice, having teachers who “get it.” *White parent with two bicultural children in the Choice program*
- “Children should be able to address a simple envelope. These kids are into email and text messaging now and you don’t have direct contact with people any more. Some young people on a field trip bus were actually speaking that way together --- using LOL as if it were a word. I don’t want my child to forget about simplicity and communication. You know, how to write a letter and not write an email.” *Presently a Mystic Choice parent for her third child but formerly had two children in the Healey neighborhood program*
- “I like how they just incorporate the different cultures in the Choice program. My son learned he liked learning Japanese. One of the teachers encourages the different cultures to come together.” *White parent with two bicultural children in the Choice program*
- “They know how teach kids to love learning, but they also teach them how to be respectful as a way to be inclusive. Be inclusive without having to be specifically inclusive. Not targeted inclusion. That has to happen on the playground, in the lunchroom and in the classroom.” *White parent in the Choice program*
- “Allowing someone to speak without interrupting them. Some children need to learn how to be a good listener. Learning that everyone has an opinion and learning to respect that opinion. Having a child be able to say, well this is what he was saying and this is what I feel. To know how to respect others opinions and hear it and be able to respectfully disagree. Learn to agree to disagree.” *Presently a Mystic Choice parent for her third child but formerly had two children in the Healey neighborhood program*

**Another 21<sup>st</sup> century skill that has been repeated over and over both in this parent forum and others: parents really want the school to teach kids a second language.**

- "It's really good -- a second language, within the school -- because it's so diverse! I think that would be really, really good." *Black parent with children in both Neighborhood and Choice programs*
- When children come to the U.S. from other countries, they often excel because they've already learned one language and encountered various languages. "When they come here, they already have something." They already have a multilingual background. It really helps to have multiple languages. *Haitian community member [by the way, this is backed up by research that shows that the skills that young people gain by becoming fluent in more than one language translate to better learning in all areas of study --- aside by OneVille team scholar]*
- "I would like my kids to learn Spanish now” (in the earliest grades). “I don't know why they have to wait until later. If Brookline can do it, Somerville can do it." *White Choice parent*

- "I think it helps you so much not just to have the language to communicate with other people -- it gives you the flexibility to know there are different ways of doing things. . .it opens up your mind. It's another reason people do better. They know there's not just one way in the world that things get done." *White community member*

**Some parents point out that translation issues continue to exist across the school and within the Choice program as well. While these parents speak generally, parents in our forums have noted many translation issues that people want to better understand and address.**

- "Even the Choice material -- that has to be translated. It is too important to not have a good translation. Yes, some are translated. But for instance, the surveys [about what Choice parents want for the school] should be translated. Some of the questions should be given in different languages. As well as this stuff on the listserv should be going beyond English. Whatever goes on the listserve is only in English. So anyone like [names parents] should be helping to get that translated." *Multilingual parent with several children and longtime participation in the Choice program*
- "The school as a whole should send [written and verbal] things out in multiple languages. You know the message about this forum went out over the telephone only in English, unless I misheard it." *White parent in the Choice program*
- *A Latina parent responds that "Latinos [were] never invited before to typical school events -- no translation."*

**Parents want to feel like educators care about children, and various parents have suggested that this is or is not the case. We suggest that this might be an important topic to take up in the future: different class, culture and neighborhood parent groups from the Healey might be convened as focus groups, so that specific practices that work well and practices that are not working can be identified and addressed.**

- "I met some [Haitian] parents when I was sharing some fliers. . ." They live near the Healey but they don't want to send their kids here. "There are a lot of parents who live in the [Mystic] development but send their kids to the Charter School." "[The Haitian parents] said, 'they don't care about kids, they don't care about parents. They don't know nothing about education.'" The parent had had kids at the Healey and pulled them out; "it seemed to her like the teachers/principal didn't care about her kid." That parent was also unsatisfied with her kid's grades. Lots of parents in the Mystic, too, send their kids to the charter school. Why do parents feel this way about the Healey? "I don't know what the problem is, but it's got to be something. They are satisfied. . .in the other school." *Haitian community member*
- Healey teachers were "at a basketball game, football game -- even the principal!" "There are so many activities at the Healey School -- my kids are there from like 8 in the morning to 8 at night." "I love the Healey School because. . .the teachers are there. It's not an 8-2 job." *Black parent with children in both Choice and Neighborhood programs*
- She likes the teachers standing outside, saying "come, come, come into class." *Haitian parent with child in the Neighborhood program*

**Many parents find that having good relationships with other parents benefits their own children's education. . . and conversely, that when parents have sustained conflict, the children suffer personally and intellectually.**

- "I love the Healey School because. . .the teachers are there. It's not an 8-2 job." "Family night -- where all families were sitting on the floor, each on a blanket, having popcorn -- SO WONDERFUL -- after the event, we stayed and cleaned up, talked to other parents -- my children were like -- it's socialization! It was really, really good." *Black parent with children in both Neighborhood and Choice programs*
- "The thing I dislike now is the commotion -- between parents, all of us." "We're not looking at all the good stuff we actually have there." It feels like a battle. The back and forth - "it's like we're battling." "I said to one parent, 'Can't we all just get along?'" (laughter from group.) (*Black parent with children in both Neighborhood and Choice*)
- "I agree with the sense of battling -- I think that there's an artificial sense -- a lot of energy spent on this program, that program, that seems like it's a lot of energy. I would like to figure out a way to tap all of the skills that people at the Healey have, to give them to children. I feel like there are people who can speak 4 languages, people who have cultural knowledge they can share and aren't asked to, people who have knowledge about science and about art - - they're asked but not enough. I'd like to figure out how to tap that, for everyone." *White parent with child in the Choice program*
- Because of the debate about the future of the Healey, parents "feel like enemies, rather than friends." The kids are absorbing this; nobody is doing anything to "help us to blend." *Latina parent with child in the Special Needs program*
- Right now, none of the parents talk -- "it feels like a war" -- she feels like she wants to get out of the school. Her daughter is "absorbing the anger." *Latina parent, Special Needs program*
- "I'm seen as 'Choice,' but I don't go to Choice meetings -- it's more the people from my child's classroom that I know, who I'm friends with; we said we'd all stay in Somerville forever. I met those families through Choice. There's a phone list, an email list, you can invite everyone to everything. You run into them at the playground, at Target." *White parent with child in the Choice program*
- There are so many opportunities in the U.S. but we are not taking advantage of learning from each other [parents]. There is no sense of community. *Latina parent*

**Parents said that the issue of tapping parent participation at the Healey is particularly complex. As in other parent forums, parent participation was discussed as a hot topic and we believe it should continue to be discussed in future forums.**

**Many said participation was very important to some Choice parents and noted a relative "lack of participation" by Neighborhood parents and also a subset of Choice parents. Some believed that this lack of participation was seen by some parents as a positive strategy for children's success; that parents need to trust teachers and stay out of their way, so that children can experience the best that teachers have to offer.**

Many Choice parents in this forum strongly spoke out to maintain and promote parent participation across the school for those parents who wish to participate; one of their fears for a merged school is that the role of parents will be diluted or reduced to the level of Neighborhood parents, who do not have an email list or parent listserv.

Parents also discussed key issues that they feel can work to increase parent participation, for those who want it, within both programs: for example intergenerational family mentoring, the presence of childcare for meetings, and social family events.

Some parents believe that the power and access that Choice parents have is not seen as being positive or desirable by some teachers or administrators at the Healey.

- “We all want the best for our child! Some parents can involve themselves more than others.”
- “I wish that more Neighborhood parents had come to this meeting. My husband is at the learning center and we talk about the changes in the Healey. And my older kids started there. *Presently a Mystic Choice parent for her third child but formerly had two children in the Healey neighborhood program*
- Some parents are very invested and involved and others are not. They think the school is doing their job.
- “There were a couple of outreaches [older parents reaching out to younger parents] done at lower grade levels. When I joined, there was outreach to the parents of younger kids. And now my oldest is in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. When I joined in 2000, there was even more outreach for the kindergarten and first grade classroom. Now my role is as a room parent coordinator. I have a sense that the new families don’t have the sense that they do belong, they don’t have the perspective that older families got. There was a time when the parents of older families would mentor parents of younger ones. Like shadowing, an introduction of what the choice program is. That used to happen more. Not having any kids in the younger grades anymore, you get a little disconnected. The room parents have organized themselves somehow, but there is less interaction with the families that have been in the program for some time now. And it comes and goes. . . it all counts on volunteerism. It’s not a perfect system. *Multilingual parent with several children and longtime participation in the choice program*
- “Pairing an older family with me, would have helped me when my first two children were going through the Healey. That’s a good idea for whatever option.” *Presently a Mystic Choice parent for her third child but formerly had two children in the Healey neighborhood program*
- “There is childcare at our [Choice parent] meetings [and that helps to increase parent participation]. But the parents do work at night.” *Multilingual parent with several children and longtime participation in the choice program*
- “[Other obstacles to parent participation are that parents] work two or three jobs. Or maybe their immigration status is something where they do not want to go to a public meeting. There are all kinds of reasons why people come and don’t come. And I think what ends up happening is that you have these parents from a certain socioeconomic status that come to

the meetings and then there is this perception that that is what choice is.” *White parent in the Choice program*

- “And I think you can have that at PTA. . . at any school where you have parents involved, the parents who have time to be involved and you know those are the parents for the most part are the ones who can afford to have parent involvement. *White parent in the Choice program*
- “But I will say that the parents who are involved are mostly parents who are not just thinking about their own child. They are thinking about what’s right for everyone’s child. Because I am one of those parents. I can’t make it to every meeting but I know there’s someone there speaking on my behalf. You, I pretty much feel they are including my child, they are including me. And that’s why I am happy and safe and I rely on them because I know someone is speaking for me, representing me. *Choice program parent with older children who experienced the Neighborhood program*
- An extended conversation between several Choice parents came to the conclusion that parent participation helps to create a Healey culture and community where people feel they can participate and they belong: “It’s like that old saying, ‘It takes a village to raise a child.’ And people in choice believe that. They encompass that.” *White parent in the Choice program*
- “So many parents keep coming back to the classrooms even though their kids are not there anymore. They know it is like a home.” *Multilingual parent with several children and longtime participation in the choice program*
- Choice parents talked about how surprised they were to find out that neighborhood parents have few ways to connect with each other; there is no class contact list, email list or listserv: “There is not a parent list or a contact list?” “That makes no sense.” “That’s like they are saying let’s build a community but not let anyone talk to each other.”
- “I think the biggest thing, from my perspective, is that the big fear is the loss of [parent] community. For me personally, I don’t object to one school. What I object to is losing that welcome-ness of our involvement, which is much less than it used to be. And the sense of community we have that we are all there and we support each other and we support each other’s kids. *White parent in the Choice program*
- “[Parents] have power and they [the principal and school administration] see what we are doing. Maybe they see what [the Choice program has] with parents and don’t want this happening. Parents have power and talk to each other in the Choice program.” *Choice program parent with older children who experienced the Neighborhood program*
- “Have they tried to put a Choice branch in every darn school of the city? It’s a so-called commodity that we have and schools want --- parent involvement has become a commodity right?” *Other parents say yes energetically.* “Applying that as a model, it’s so not true. They [school administrators] just give lip service and do other things.” *Multilingual parent with several children and longtime participation in the choice program*

- “I really feel that what they [school administration and structure] want is our kids and they don’t want us [parents].” [Other choice parents said: “Exactly. Exactly.] *White parent in the Choice program*
- *A Choice parent asks a Neighborhood parent:* If a parent moves from Choice to Neighborhood, would she feel welcome? Can she come in during the day to help with reading or cooking with the kids? Or is it the teacher who determines if they want parents in there? *Another Neighborhood parent responds:* yes, the parent would be welcome to participate.
- The full group discussed how a Robocall about the 1 May forum went out only in English, despite a request for translation. One parent got the message about this event when she saw the OneVille sign at the top of the Mystic staircase and saw flyers posted above the mailboxes; she then put it on her “iphone at work, wrote it in my calendar.”
- *A Latina parent responds that* “Latinos [were] never invited before to typical school events – no translation.”
- Latinos “don’t feel empowered to come because they feel excluded, not American, don’t hear their voices heard, so stop coming.”
- Through a translator, *a Latina parent* says that Choice “asks folks for money all the time” – she felt pressured to give lots of money. Even the “nickels and dimes” added up. So, she chose to remove her child from the Choice program. “The brown envelope” (a way for Choice parents to contribute anonymously) for money was pressuring.
- The Choice program asks for something every week – Money / donations. The Choice program is always sending letters about needing spoons, forks, soap disinfectant. Every week they send a letter home that they need something.
- As of two years ago, parents received letters that Choice parents need to raise \$10,000.
- *A white, multilingual parent* says that he is unemployed right now, so understands that “any money is enormous effort. But I have time – I can offer it. Can we have some sensitivity to ask people to donate time? We need to understand that resources are also time, and skills.” “We need to offer it to the school, not just expect Choice parents only” to donate this.
- “But some people don’t have money or time,” *a Latina parent* responds. Some work two jobs or have to watch the kids at home. People are in a variety of situations.
- So, people don’t participate but often don’t explain why. Parents who asked for volunteers feel ignored, says *a white parent with children in the Choice program.*
- The group discusses two big, fraught issues: how parents share money; how parents share time. We note that a lot of community is built or weakened in these small things.
- *A white Choice parent* raises what she heard teachers say: they had a fear of “Choicification” of the school, “because they don’t want parent involvement.” The school community has enormous resources; talents; languages. Administrators don’t welcome and tap this. There must be some middle ground between “parents out the door” and “parents too up in teachers’ business.”

- “Parents will cut and run if they feel unwelcomed,” Says a *white parent with a child in the Choice program*.
- “Every person has something to contribute – baking, volunteering.”
- *How do parents want to be involved? How can parents be involved?* the group wonders.
- A *Latina parent*: “Last year, I volunteered for a Choice class and the teacher only wanted me to make copies.”
- A *Latina parent* reports that she read a book in Neighborhood class, and that she felt welcome even though she has an accent and doesn’t speak good English. The teacher encouraged her to come back and do it again.

**Parents expressed confusion about whether any differences exist between the Choice and Neighborhood programs and how that has changed over the history of the program.**

- Not everyone knows what Choice is. “It’s popular, that’s why I have my kid in there.” *Latina parent with a child in the Choice program*
- Choice advertised as 18 kids per class. Compared to Neighborhood kids: 22-24 kids with each teacher. Now the Choice program has more kids with each teacher. *Latina parent*
- "Do you feel like there is a way of teaching that some teachers do that other teachers really don't who are in the Neighborhood program or the Special needs program?" *asked by White parent with a child in the Choice program*
- "When I asked about the 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's 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 [son ] had 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*
- “How does it work when the students all come together [in 7/8<sup>th</sup> grade]? Do they have different backgrounds? Did they get a different education? Do the parents have different perspectives on what they wanted? Do the Neighborhood or Choice kids seem to have had a

different education from one another?” *White community member and Black parent, talking together*

- *A longtime multilingual choice parent spoke about some recent Choice program history that she feels had mixed impacts on the Choice program.* “I think that one of the things that happened in Choice, which at the time there was a kind of uproar about it, but I actually think it was a good thing --- was that one of the principals when choice was developing a second strand, was taking kids who were in the neighborhood program and moving them into choice. So, they weren’t kids that weren’t in choice and were not families that had chosen --- Principal Stevens --- so my daughter was in kindergarten through second grade. So, in my daughter was in first or second grade (she’s now in 5<sup>th</sup> grade), Mr. Stevens took a whole lot of neighborhood kids and put them into spaces in the choice program. And choice parents were upset about that because they felt like --- there was always a lottery, there was always a waiting list. “

“But I also think that it changed the choice program in a lot of ways, probably because there is a lot of parent involvement and there are a lot of families that didn’t choose to be in choice, that didn’t understand choice. But at the same time it increased the diversity of choice families and I think it has ended up being a really good thing for the program.”

“And that’s why I started out saying that the perception that choice is sort of one socioeconomic class --- is mostly white, mostly educated --- is not really true for so many reasons, both among the families that have chosen to be in the program, but also these families who are in the program not because they chose to be there but because their children were placed there. I feel that, at least from my perspective, all of those families are included and are communicated with to the best of everyone’s ability. And I think that partly what happens and it happens with any kind of meeting is that, parents who can and are able to come to the meetings but a lot of families can’t. There is a single parent or they work at night or they need childcare or there are language issues.” *Multilingual parent with several children and longtime participation in the choice program*

**Many misconceptions were raised and discussed and some gaps of information were identified about the Choice and Neighborhood programs, especially those that exist when parents talk about the “other program” and the “other program’s parents.”**

- Choice is seen as “upper class,” but is this a misperception? *Latina parent with a child in the Choice program*
- One *white parent* says she is realizing that there are “misperceptions from all sides” – one group of parents as X, another as Y. But there’s a huge span of different attitudes within each program. *White parent with a child in the Choice program*
- “I moved here [to Somerville] because of the diversity. I was surprised to not see the same racial balance within Choice as within the city. It’s the job of parents to say which school fits. But are we insensitive to people with lesser privileges? It is free enrollment; people sign up for it; it’s open. I will give to the school regardless of what structure it takes. If the Choice program folds, I don’t want to be seen as elitist. I do offer to the Neighborhood too. We are unrecognized and badly treated in the district.” *White parent with child in the Choice program*

- *When her first child was enrolled in the Healey this parent did not even know what questions to ask about the programs and it wasn't until her third child that she became aware of the Choice program:* “Healey is the only school I really know. My daughter is 20 now and she worked really hard for her education. My son is 22. She went from the Healey to Prospect Academy. I moved into the Mystic complex in 1992 and the Healey was the closest school so I put my children there [in the Neighborhood program] and I never knew about the Choice [program].”

“Then when I had [my son], I went to an open house to see what was going on there. I can't remember who I spoke to. There was a young lady there who spoke to me right away and she told me about the Choice program. It woke me up and excited me and I signed [my son] up. I did not even know what questions to ask.”

- *Another parent with children in the choice program had a lot of help from experienced friends:* “I have friends who are in the education field and they asked me too many questions about the school. I was, “you guys just gotta relax a little bit.”

“What I really like about the school is that the building is really nice, for one. The diversity in the school is really great and I like that for my kids. That's pretty common in the majority of the schools in Somerville. *White parent in the Choice program*”

- *A longtime multilingual Choice parent spoke about how sometimes there is a self-selecting trend in Choice program admission.* “A lot of Choice is that you have to know people who are in it to know that it exists. Then it kind of becomes a self-selecting program which doesn't benefit choice and doesn't benefit the community the way it should. It makes Choice seem like it is an isolated ivory tower program and it isn't.”
- *A longtime multilingual Choice parent believes misconceptions cause tensions between the choice and neighborhood programs:* “What the school struggles around at a certain level is correct and incorrect perceptions at a certain level. I think that Choice has misconception that it has people from upper socioeconomic backgrounds. And that makes everyone else in the program invisible. I think there is the conception that it is only white and that is not true. That it is mostly upper socioeconomic families, which is not true. I am getting into something I am not supposed to talk about.”
- *An African American parent struggled with her own misconceptions to participate in the Choice program.* “When I first came to the Choice program, I was a intimidated by the parents who were engineers and doctors. I felt, not unwelcome, but because of my own personal issues with my own self, I was scared.

“But then I am a people person and I allow myself to open up and get to know the parents. I guess where that misconception comes from is that people are used to their own people. Who I live with. They get into that comfort zone. Anyone that's different or they perceive different is someone scary. And like I said, I battle at the learning center and meetings, you know “they are better than you.”

“But that's not it. They are welcoming. And they are accepting. That's my experience with the Choice.”

### **Parents felt that field trips are a particularly fraught issue at the Healey.**

- *A Latina parent remarks:* Until this whole thing came up, I didn't know a lot about the whole school. I didn't know that the Choice program kids go on a field trip in 2nd grade – the Neighborhood Healey classroom does not participate. All three 2nd grade classrooms should have participated.
- "I know there's one incident with Nature's classroom -- the Neighborhood children have never been asked to go. I don't know if the Neighborhood teachers have ever pursued doing the funding for it, and getting the program -- but that's just not fair, for children not to have the opportunity." *White community member*
- "Both my children went, and I must say, they had a wonderful time." Until the week they were going, they didn't know the Neighborhood kids weren't going. *Black parent with children in Choice program and Neighborhood program*
- "The kids often say that Choice = more field trips." *White parent in Choice program*
- *Latina parents with children in the Neighborhood, Choice, and Special Needs programs discuss a number of issues in a small group:* The Choice's nature class goes on a field trip for a full week. A lot of controversy. The Choice kids can go for the whole week but the Neighborhood kids cannot go. In the 6th grade they go for a trip but parents have to pay for it. Parent did not sign up child for Choice because it's too expensive. There are Choice scholarships available for the nature class but she didn't know. Many parents don't have money to pay for the nature class. They have to pay out of their own pocket. The money that is saved for food or rent has to be spent on the nature class. They don't want to be seen like they can't afford so it becomes a competitive issue.
- A *white Choice parent*, in the full group, says that she doesn't want to lose opportunities like Nature's classroom. They raised money to make it available to everyone. Was it publicized as available to everyone? Maybe not. There's a perception among Neighborhood parents that you can't go. They were trying to open it to the whole school, next year.

**Parents are confused and worried about the process of determining the Healey's future. Some parents have yet to develop a trust in the administration of the school and school district, and this complicates their feelings.**

- *A longtime Choice parent explains Choice Parent Council efforts to identify what parents want for the school.* "The Parent Council meeting had us break up into focus programs to have us express what we wanted to keep and the things we perceived were a current problem at the school. And then try to fit it under the options that are out there in the school committee, that are proposed. And to see how --- let's call them A B C for the sake of shortening it --- the first option would do about the problems and would it actually allow us to keep what we want to keep or not. That was the goal.

"We only ended up having about 20 minutes to actually do this, as most meetings run. Now the stage that we are at with the council and stuff is that basically we are going over some of the list of comments that are currently going on around the school.

"So eventually at the next council meeting we are going to mention that --- because the whole point was to get a survey out there. And really get out there and find out what people

want. That is the crucial thing. Unless we are unified around what we want, what the heck can we ask for?

- An *African American Choice parent* and a *multilingual Choice parent* spoke together about how they did not oppose the merging of the Choice and Neighborhood programs, but feared that the administration would eliminate the parts of the Choice program that benefit parents and children in any merger. They expressed a lack of trust in the administration and structure.
- “If that is what they wanted to do is to merge, then I am not against that, but I want to make sure that they do bring over what’s in the Choice program over into the merge. I don’t want them to eliminate that.” *A Choice parent from the Mystic*
- “But systematically they will pick and choose what they want to keep [and it won’t necessarily benefit us or our children].” *Parent with longtime participation in the choice program*
- A group of Latina parents mentioned miscommunication about the school’s future; there was widespread confusion, they said, about some people wanting to move or change the program or close it.
- "With all the voices talking about what the Healey is, what the Healey could be -- there's change brewing, which is not a bad thing. With the dialogue will come change, with the opinions being expressed. Hopefully we can move forward with that." *White community member and teacher*

## Straw Poll on Three Options for the Healey School

The meeting ended with straw poll about the three options for the Healey School that stirred strong emotions among participants. The OneVille team brought out a mock poll ballot on the “three options,” and asked if people wanted to anonymously “vote” on their current opinion about the options. We explained that OneVille was agnostic on the actual options but wanted to serve as a channel for parent input.

Looking at the ballot, some parents got visibly upset. One *Latina parent* who described a long journey in getting her children established happily in both programs almost started to cry, saying through an interpreter that she was “very upset – both programs are good.” She expressed her concern for the visible impact of the school instability at this time on her children and other children in the school. Other parents chimed in and expressed both a desire for improvement and anxiety about changes that they felt were not thought through sufficiently or explained with enough clarity.

The question “What does it feel like to have these options before you?” was asked.

“None of the options are fleshed out enough,” said one parent.

“The choice between is painful,” said another.

“What would the classrooms be like? What will education be like?” another says. “What would parental participation be like in the new school?” said another.

“We’re being set up,” says another, adding, “it seems clear that the top-down pressure is for merger, for one school. The decision-making feels top-down and not empowering.”

“Who will decide how the school is combined?” says another. “The principal? The superintendent?”

The group decided they wanted to take the straw poll with some modifications. Participants decided that they wanted to be able to choose more than one option, checking those options they were open to considering for the benefit of their children. We collected the paper straw polls in a box and tabulated them, so all the answers would be anonymous.

A large majority of participants felt the options to either maintain and/or merge the choice and neighborhood programs would benefit children most. Only one participant chose having a separate school for the Choice program as one of the two options marked on his/her poll. Most participants felt they could not be *sure* about which option was best for children until they had more particulars about *how* the Choice and Neighborhood would be blended and whether or not some important practices in the Choice Program would be maintained after the merge.

Participants also scribbled extra opinions on different places on their polls next to the three options or our added option, "Option 4: Something else. Tell us!" Here are some of the things they said:

- One person who marked both "Option 4" and "Option 1: Everything stays the same" wrote, "give Healey School 2 equal programs, each with their own principal, and make all resources and number of classes for each program the SAME. Continue to work on communication. Level the playing field."
- Another parent, who ranked "Option 2: The Choice and Neighborhood programs combine" as the top choice, wrote, "NO!" loudly across "Option 3: The Choice program leaves the Healey."
- Another parent wrote in for Option 4: "Explain to the whole community how the Choice program works. Give the Neighborhood program the option to join the Choice program, given the educational methodology of it. Who ever does not want to stay in Choice should be relocated to another school. (Or, keep the Neighborhood Program in the same building, but without SEGREGATION.)"
- Another wrote, "Option 2: 'The Choice and Neighborhood programs combine' works depending on the goal of the new school to be inclusive of all families and to allow parent participation and contribution of resources to be shared by all students."