



Building a Knowledge Community:

Results of the Hamblen County Educational Engagement Process

THE PROCESS

Over a fifteen-month period -- from March of 2001 until May of 2002—the Hamblen County community was engaged in an extraordinary opportunity to increase its educational awareness through a participatory process. The purpose of this report is to share with the residents of Hamblen County the results of this process – which we see not as an end in itself, but rather as a beginning – part of a foundation of strengthening and improving the knowledge of our community with respect to education and its role in social and economic development of Hamblen County and its citizens.

This engagement process was planned and facilitated by representatives of HC*EXCELL and the Education Committee of The Morristown Area Chamber of Commerce, through a partnership that included Tennessee Technology at Morristown and Walters State Community College. The goal of this engagement process was

To identify the educational strengths and weaknesses of the Hamblen County Educational System and its community support.

One of the most exciting aspects of this participatory process has been the wide range of persons involved in these engagement forums: students, parents, representatives of business and industry, senior citizens, teachers, school administrators, public officials, and community organizations from Hamblen County.

During the 15-month period of the public engagement process, 13 engagement sessions were held, with a range of 7 to 60 persons attending.

Altogether, approximately 550 Hamblen County citizens participated in this democratic process. Some of the forums were held specifically for an organization or community group (e.g., Morristown Housing Authority, Hamblen County educators, education governing and funding bodies), and some were organized to ensure representation on the part of a broad range of participants. After a 20-minute video preview presentation of “School– The Story of American Public Education,” several questions were asked to stimulate discussion, with the focus on ensuring a natural flow of ideas from the participants. Following the discussion, the participants were asked to complete surveys that gathered information including: their views of the importance of education, how education should be funded, strengths/weaknesses of community school system, and how the community could be involved in improving the school system. Blank cards on which to write additional comments were distributed. The results of the meetings and surveys were collected and analyzed, and this report was prepared with the assistance of Dr. Irene Anne Jillson, President, Policy Research Incorporated and Dr. Paul Haugh of NetGains, Incorporated.

Citizen Participation Works!

This process has demonstrated that education is a concern to a broad range of Hamblen County citizens, who are willing to devote time and energy to ensuring that the future of education in the county is improved, and linked strongly to economic opportunity and development.

THE FINDINGS

Hamblen County residents are fortunate to have a solid school system, a committed private sector, and a large group of citizens willing to devote time and attention to exploring ways to ensure that Hamblen County meets the educational needs of its population by providing a high quality education system for all students as well as supportive working conditions for its teachers and administrators.

The range of topics discussed was necessarily wide-ranging – reflecting the diversity of the Morristown population. There were five recurrent themes throughout the discussions and the survey findings: safety, communication, community interaction, equity, and funding. The ideas generated within each of these themes are briefly synthesized.

Hamblen County has many strengths on which to build a strong educational and economic future for its citizens.

- A caring community
- Partnership of schools with business and industry
- A staff of quality teachers
- People who want to volunteer for youth in the community
- Mix of racial groups that could work together

SAFETY. Overall, the students, parents, teachers, and community residents who attended these engagement sessions felt that the student population, teachers, and administrators are secure and safe within the Hamblen County School System. The Hamblen County School Board, administration and law enforcement agencies of Hamblen County should be commended on their efforts and success in providing safe schools in Hamblen County. This is particularly important given the strong relationship between high academic achievement and safe school environments, as well as the present national concern for school safety.

COMMUNICATION. A commonly mentioned strength on which educational planning and reform could be built is the communication and teamwork between principals and teachers. In addition, these attendees saw Hamblen County teachers as the greatest strength of the educational system, perhaps in part because they believe that teachers communicate with them.

Communication played an important role in the engagement attendees' perception of the Hamblen County education system, including its governing, funding and administrative bodies. Participants believe that there is a dearth of information flowing from these bodies to the community at large and between and among the public educational bodies themselves. This can lead to lack of understanding of key educational issues as well as misinterpretation of information that is available. From the participants' points of view, this could also lead to a lack of credibility in the educational system. This is important because the perception of many participants in these public engagement forums is that improved communication is essential to producing a high quality education system in Hamblen County.

A change in the school administration this past year seems to have improved communication between the school board and the school administration. This is potentially an important harbinger of the future of communication within the Hamblen County education system and, in turn, between and among the education system—the school administration, the school board, and the county commission-- and the community at large.

FUNDING. An integral part of providing a quality education system is the community's support of taxation and expenditures for educational needs. These engagement forums showed that the participants were not necessarily opposed to taxation in support of quality education, but rather that they wanted an equitable balance in collecting and distributing these funds. The participants would like a greater voice in how the funds are distributed and would like to be assured that everyone is contributing their fair share. The participants indicated a desire for the

Equity in Public Education Financing and Expenditures

Hamblen County citizens are willing to pay for quality education through taxes, but want a fair and equitable balance in the collection and distribution of these funds.

administrative, governing and funding bodies of education to become more accountable and communicative to the public in regard to the distribution and use of educational funds. This would include having more transparent fiscal management whereby the citizens of Hamblen County can have access to budgets and other documents. This would allow citizens to observe and participate in meetings regarding education funding.

COMMUNITY INTERACTION AND INVOLVEMENT. The public engagement forums represented an important learning process for all involved. It was clear that many areas of the community -- business, community organizations, parents, faith organizations -- would like to be involved to a larger extent in the school system. Overall, the participants felt that their input could be valued to a greater degree. The participants believe that the school system wants input on its terms --that the school system solicits --and, through taxes, receives -- money from the community, but is not interested in the broad-based community's point of view on education. It is clear from the opinions expressed by those represented at these forums that Hamblen County citizens are eager to assist the school system in any manner that would contribute to the public good. Many citizens are available to teach classes based on their field of expertise, tutor children, and help with school administration. To utilize these invaluable resources, and establish a functional process to do so, there needs to be coordination between the educational system and the community.

Many participants expressed the belief that one important issue to address is strengthening parental skills to support their children in educational endeavors. Indeed, some participants expressed their interest in gaining these skills and having a greater voice in the education of their children. This is a challenge for both the public and private sectors in Hamblen County and one that is critical for its social and economic development. It is also an achievable goal and one for which resources are available. However, school system and community collaboration, together with parental engagement in the processes, are critical.

Working Together for Change

The community and school system must work together to achieve a quality school system for Hamblen County.

Some parents have a lack of skills and resources to support their children's educational development. This is an example of an urgent need that could be met through public and private sector

EQUITY. Throughout the engagement process it became apparent that equity within the school system is an issue that student and parent attendees believe was important. For the participants, there seems to be an imbalance in allocation of resources and attention between academic achievement and athletics, with more attention being paid and resources being spent on athletic programs and physical structures than on academic curriculum, other extracurricular activities, and higher education information and opportunities. This is an issue that is faced across socio-economic levels -- although it has the most deleterious impact on the most

disadvantaged citizens of the Hamblen County community. Balance is what most participants wanted to have valued in the school system and in the community at large.

THE CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This extraordinary participatory process, built on the strong sense of community volunteerism in Hamblen County—demonstrated that the public and private sectors can work collaboratively to plan for a stronger, more equitable, and more economically viable community. The findings are clear: While there are critical needs, there are also considerable strengths on which to construct a foundation for positive change and a plethora of creative approaches to meeting those needs.

Tennessee – the Volunteer State; Hamblen – the Volunteer County

Volunteerism is one of the many positive strengths on which educational reform can be built in our community.

It is the recommendation of the coalition that the community engagement process continue, moving forward over the next twelve months through a series of coordinated and facilitated “gatherings” of key stakeholder groups (e.g. educators, parents, business and industry, elected and appointed officials, service and community organizations, social and health service providers, and the community at large). The purpose of these gatherings would be

to develop a Quality Education Vision for Hamblen County.

This Vision statement would include both broad discussions of educational needs, opportunities, and goals, as well as specific steps to attain this vision, including recommendations for action. The meetings could build on the themes derived from this participatory process: communication, funding, community interaction and equity. They could also take into account current, relevant plans being devised by the relevant stakeholders, including for example: the school system, Hamblen County government generally, the private sector (e.g., the Chamber of Commerce), higher education and pre-school programs in the county and the state, the health care system, community organizations and the faith community. Strengthening the role of the broad-based community in public education and putting educational planning in a broad community and socioeconomic development context could lay the foundation for building a high quality education system to support Hamblen County throughout the new century.

At this point in the participatory process, we are able to derive recommendations from the findings for each of the four focal points of our community; these are highlighted below.

Educators

It is critical for educators in Hamblen County to see themselves and the community in a broad context, comparing its educational system and student achievement to that of Tennessee, the U.S., and the world's community of nations. This is increasingly important in the global marketplace. In order to do this, it is important to be aware of innovations and best practices that are taking place in educational systems across the world, to know what other student populations are achieving, and to explore how this links with economic and social development generally and how these innovations, best practices, and linkages apply to –or could be adapted by—Hamblen County. Educators also could think locally, enhancing communication and working relationship with the community, and engaging the community in decision-making processes and in planning for the educational future of Hamblen County. They could raise expectations of our students and teachers and provide support for students and teachers to reach these expectations. Finally, they could work more closely and cooperatively with other educational institutions (e.g., Head Start, day care, Tennessee Technology, Walters State Community College) as well as with a broad range of social and other service organizations to help meet the needs of families in the school system and strengthen their ability to play a positive role in the educational development of their children and of children in the community generally.

Business and Industry

Business and industry leaders urgently need to support a higher quality educational system through attending and speaking out at school board meetings, county commission meetings, chamber meetings and in the community overall. They also can contribute resources –finances, goods and services --to support the educational system, related service organizations and the community at large. Most importantly, they need to become an integral part of the effort to create, design and produce a plan for a world-class education system in Hamblen County; it is, quite simply, the economically and socially smart thing to do.

Government

The local governing bodies responsible for funding, administering, and providing educational services could examine and define their roles as the leaders of an education improvement program for our community. It is imperative that those serving as public employees, including but not limited to educators, make a commitment to ensuring that we are a thriving community in 20 years. They could be a part of creating and building the foundation for this to happen, working as a team rather than as adversaries to progress.

Community

Hamblen County needs you, its citizens as members of the community generally and as parents. With your increased involvement in your children's education and in the educational system, and participation in this engagement process, we can build a strong school system for all our children and adults, and an economically strong and socially equitable community.

**TOGETHER WE CAN,
TOGETHER WE WILL,
TOGETHER WE MUST
BUILD A STRONG SCHOOL SYSTEM FOR ALL
OUR CHILDREN AND ADULTS, AND AN ECONOMICALLY STRONG
AND SOCIALLY EQUITABLE HAMBLEN COUNTY COMMUNITY**