

Larchmont Schools

Strategic Direction of the Larchmont Schools Executive Director Recommendation to the Board of Directors Regular Board Meeting August 31, 2010

I. INTRODUCTION

The Larchmont Schools has had a powerful 5 years. We have gone from an idea spreading through homes of Hancock Park to a network of 2 schools serving nearly 700 students. In 2010, early estimations suggest that both LCS and LCW could have an API of 900 or higher. In the spring of 2010, both schools admitted their most diverse classes yet.

Celebrating all the successes the Larchmont Schools have experienced to date, the Board of Directors thought it appropriate to step back, reassess how we define success, and set a strategic direction for the upcoming years. The aim was not to proscribe a comprehensive set of requirements for our schools, but instead to identify a few measurable targets we expect our schools to achieve which will ensure that we are headed on the right path toward success.

In order to tackle the project, the Board returned to our mission:

The mission of the Larchmont Schools is to provide a socio-economically, culturally and racially diverse community of students with an exceptional public education. We foster creativity and academic excellence; our students learn with and from each other in an experience-centered, inquiry-based learning environment. With participation from our entire community, we strive to instill in each student a dedication to improving the world we inhabit.

We know that when we achieve our mission, we can inspire a ripple effect of change throughout Los Angeles and the country. By demonstrating that schools can be simultaneously public, open to all, and diverse, we can challenge more schools to be created that are both high quality and serve a student population that mirrors the diversity of our community, our city and our country.

Upon reflecting on the mission, the Board charged the Executive Director and the Schools to come back with an answer to 3 critical questions:

- How should we define educational excellence?
- What does it mean to be diverse?
- How should we define community engagement?

II. PROCESS

In May, the Executive Director asked both LCS and LCW to recommend a small group of teachers, parents, and school leaders to form a Strategic Planning Working Group. This group – 11 in total – was charged with providing the Larchmont Schools Board of Directors with the data, analysis, and input from the LCS and LCW communities necessary for the Board to make the best decisions regarding the strategic direction of the Larchmont Schools. The Working Group was subdivided into 3 smaller groups, each of which would tackle 1 of the 3 questions the board posed. Each group was comprised of representatives from LCW and LCS. The groups were:

- Educational Excellence: Kristin Droege (LCW Principal), Rachel Green (LCS Teacher), and Beth Wishnie (LCW Parent)
- Diversity: Whitney Homchick (LCW Teacher); Nora Robinson (LCS Teacher); Frances Hoge (LCS Parent); and Myra Salinas (LCS Assistant Principal)
- Community: Margaret Winnen (Larchmont Schools Business Manager); Dolores Patton (LCS Principal); and Mersedeh Emrani (LCW Teacher)

Each group was given the autonomy to conduct their research, solicit input from their communities, and do their analysis in a way that made the most sense. Multiple times throughout the process, groups met with the Executive Director to get feedback on their process to ensure they were driving toward the most data rich high quality product.

In July 10, the Board of Directors conducted a public retreat to review and openly discuss the write ups from the various groups. After giving feedback to the Executive Director, the Board charged the Executive Director for making formal recommendations to the Board at the August 31, 2010 meeting. This document represents a write up of the formal recommendations and the rationale behind these recommendations.

III. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – RECOMMENDATIONS

Key Area	Recommended Targets
Education Excellence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Overarching Aim</u> - We are working to ensure every child at every grade level is on path to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Being accepted into one of the top 100 colleges in America upon graduation from high school ○ Succeed as independent learners in a multi-disciplinary environment in college and in life • <u>Constructivist Education</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Students complete a defined number of

	<p>projects that meet a 3-4 on the rubric for assessing high quality projects. The number of projects to be completed at each grade level will be presented to the Board at the October Board meeting.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The rubric for assessing high quality projects, which will also be presented to the Board at the October Board meeting, shall measure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Integration of multiple content areas</i> ▪ <i>Rigor and standards based</i> ▪ <i>Differentiation</i> ▪ <i>Social Responsibility & Community Engagement</i> ▪ <i>Incorporation of Constructivist Principles</i> • <u>Standards-based Outcomes</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ API Places us in the top 5% of all comparable schools within LAUSD <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ For both K-6 and K-8 schools, compare against Elementary Schools ○ For 2nd grade and above: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Over 50% of our students score Advanced on the CST in ELA and Math ▪ No Child falls “below basic” or “far below basic” on the CST for more than one year ○ For K/1: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 95% of children meet or exceed grade level expectations on the DRA or Fountas & Pinnel assessment by the end of 1st grade ▪ A similarly ambitious and feasible target will be set for a specified 1st grade end-of-year math assessment • <u>No Achievement Gap</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ For 2nd grade and up: No gap by racial/ethnic or socio-economic status in percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient combined on the CST ○ For K/1: No gap on end of year reading or math assessments at the end of 1st grade
Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40% of the students in each school’s entering

	<p>Kindergarten class (on the first day of school) should qualify for Free and Reduced Price Lunch.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In grades where we increase the number of students enrolled, 40% of the new students entering into that grade on the first day of school should qualify for Free and Reduced Price Lunch • 50% of students entering the lottery every year should be non-white • No gaps in attrition by race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All projects should have a component of teaching social responsibility (incorporated above) • The schools should report back to the Board next year on the amount, diversity, and type of family engagement that go on at each schools to enable the Board to make an informed choice about how to set a meaningful target in this area.

IV. EDUCATION EXCELLENCE: BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY

In order to tackle the question of education excellence, I reviewed the Working Group narrative and teased out 3 recurring themes. The first theme called upon the education at the Larchmont Schools to be “exceptional.” By this the working group focused on clearly defining what we want students to know and be sure to define it in a way that ensured the education offered at the Larchmont Schools was among the best in the city. The second theme was centered around “diversity.” The Working Group felt that the mission called upon the Larchmont Schools to offer each child, regardless of race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status and equally high quality education. The third theme centered around constructivism – the idea that learning should be “creative,” “experience-centered,” and “inquiry based.”

The group conducted their research in 3 stages. First, they identified a number of high quality schools (including many constructivist schools) to see how they defined educational excellence. They researched Open Charter, Wildwood, Dalton in New York City, and Mountain View Montessori. Second, they leveraged the education expertise in the working group (Kristin has a Ph.D in education and Rachel is an instructor in elementary instruction at UCLA). Third, instead of asking open-ended questions of parents, they decided to engage the parent community at both schools after the Board retreat when more formalized recommendations were on the table. This way, they believed they could empower parents to react to the best thinking among education professionals which would yield the highest quality input from parents.

The initial research yielded two important findings. First, very few schools have a clear sense of how to blend a commitment to measurable student outcomes with a constructivist education philosophy. In fact, we all can think of lots of examples of schools doing one well at the exclusion of the other. There are schools that are so focused on measurable student outcomes that the child's educational experience is narrow and focused on a singular year-end assessment, i.e. a standardized test. We also know there are other schools that are so focused on project-based or constructivist learning, that they lose focus of what they want children to learn and instead hold themselves accountable to what students do (i.e. engage in projects) not what they learn. We at Larchmont are committed to enabling all students to learn at the highest level. We hold ourselves accountable to ensuring students learn the California State Standards as measured by multiple assessments (including the CST). The way we deliver this instruction is through a creative, project-based, thematic and integrated constructivist curriculum. We believe this approach enables us to meet all students' needs while keeping us focused on teaching the whole child.

The second finding that became clear was that we need multiple assessments to measure student learning. We can't rely on one type of assessment (e.g. standardized tests, projects) but need a wide variety of assessments to really help us measure what students are learning.

As the group began conducting its research, it also became clear to me that we should take the time to define what we are educating our children for. We do not want to educate our children so that they have only a strong experience from one grade level to the next. Instead, we want to be purposeful about building toward an end. That end, I believe we need to be preparing our children to be successful as independent learners in a multi-disciplinary, high level, collegiate experience. It is true that some of our children may choose not to attend one of our country's top colleges. But we want to prepare them to have that choice and to make that choice as adults (or near-adults) and not have that choice made for them in their childhood. Similarly, I didn't feel that preparing our students to be accepted to college without giving them the tools they would need to be successful in college or life would be enough.

Therefore, I recommend that we adopt a 2 pronged over-arching aim or "northstar." A "northstar" is a point we are driving toward, something we wake up every day to orient our work around and ask ourselves if we are headed in the right direction. The "northstar" helps us to recommend the measurable goals. It will help us in future years as we grow and our context changes to recommend new goals. It helps every person in our community (staff, teachers, and students) to expand beyond our goals to ensure we go above and beyond to drive toward this ambitious outcome. I recommend we set our overarching aims as:

- Being accepted into one of the top 100 colleges in America upon graduation from high school

- Succeed as independent learners in a multi-disciplinary environment in college and in life

In conjunction with feedback from the Education Excellence Working Group, I recommend we set our measurable goals in 3 areas:

- Constructivism – We are not a “drill and kill” or a “teach to the test” set of schools. We believe that the best way to ensure our students learn what we want them to learn is through a rich constructivist curriculum. We expect that each teacher at each grade level will design and implement this curriculum differently. At the board level though, we want to set a “bare minimum” expectation for what constructivism should look like. I know we are all heavily influenced by the thoughtful work Kristin Droege did this year at LCW to design a rubric to establish expectations for what rigorous project-centered learning should be at LCW. I propose we use that as our model and expect that all teachers at the Larchmont Schools design and implement a grade-level appropriate number of projects throughout the year that achieve a 3 or a 4 on a shared rubric which measures:
 - *Integration* - # of content areas integrated into the project (including Math, ELA, VAPA, Science, Social Studies, and PE)
 - *Rigor and standards based* – how well the content is aligned to the highest levels of the California state standards
 - *Differentiation* – Level of differentiation for learning level and ELL
 - *Social Responsibility & Community Engagement* - the level to which the project addresses the social responsibility component of our mission; including components which teach how to appreciate, participate in, and lead in a diverse society.
 - *Incorporation of Constructivist Principles* – the level to which the project presents concepts through multiple means and allows children to build up from their own personal experiences to make meaning of the new material

I would like to present both the finalized rubric as well as know what the developmentally appropriate number of projects at every grade level will be to the Board at the October Board meeting.

- Academic Rigor – We want to make sure that all our children are learning at the highest level and getting an education that is equal to or better than the best public or private schools in the city. Therefore, I recommend we set the following goals:
 - API Places us in the top 5% of all comparable schools within LAUSD (For our K-8 schools, we would compare their performance against Elementary Schools in LAUSD, which is a higher bar)
 - For 2nd grade and above (the grades at which the CST is given):
 - Over 50% of our students score Advanced on the CST in ELA and Math
 - No Child falls “below basic” or “far below basic” on the CST for more than one year

- For K/1:
 - 95% of children meet or exceed grade level expectations on the DRA or Fountas & Pinnel assessment by the end of 1st grade
 - The Board wants to see a similarly ambitious and feasible target for the 1st grade end-of-year math assessment and would like the Executive Director to work with the heads of school and share what the target will be and on what assessments at the October Board meeting.
- No Achievement Gap – We believe all children, regardless of racial, ethnic, or socio-economic status can achieve at equally high levels. Therefore, we want to establish goals that hold us accountable to seeing no gap by racial, ethnic, or socio-economic status on year end assessments. Specifically,
 - For 2nd grade and up: No gap by racial/ethnic or socio-economic status in percentage of students scoring advanced or proficient combined on the CST
 - For K/1: No gap on end of year reading or math assessments at the end of 1st grade

If we adopt these educational goals, I strongly believe the Larchmont Schools will be a place that prepares all children to be successful at college and in life.

V. DIVERSITY: BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY

There are many schools which seek to offer their students an exceptional public education but very few across the country which aim to serve a racially, culturally, and socio-economically diverse community of students. Our belief – and our mission - that we can have exemplary public schools that are truly diverse is probably the component that sets the Larchmont Schools apart the most.

From the onset of the Larchmont Schools, we have sought to set a high bar for diversity. Our Board minutes and other historical documents reflect that at the December 8, 2005 Board of Directors meeting, the Board unanimously approved a diversity plan that set a goal that the incoming class in the 2007-2008 school year would be 40-50% Title I with a schoolwide population that was 42% Title I by the 2010-2011 school year. In preparation for the 2009 Lottery, the Board reaffirmed the 40% incoming Title I target and this remained unchanged for the 2010 Lottery.

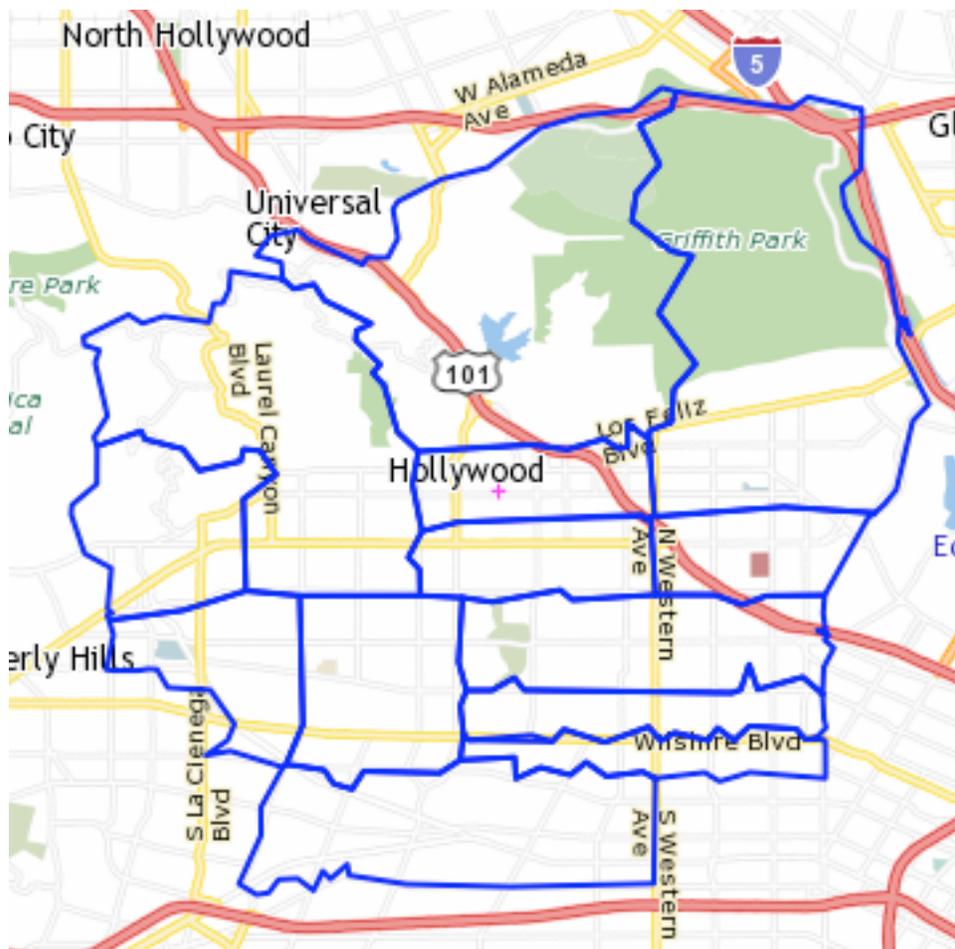
In order to define what we mean by diversity going forward, the working group and the board focused on the aspects of diversity highlighted in our mission: race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. While we value diversity along all dimensions, it is diversity along these 3 dimensions that we are required by our mission to define. The working group reviewed diversity and its impact on a variety of dimensions, but the evaluation along 3 key dimensions proved to be the most helpful in guiding Board discussion:

- Community – What is the diversity of our community and how should that impact our diversity?
- Academic – What are the academic implications of diversity, if any?
- Operational – What are the operational implications of diversity?

There were other areas we looked at, such as parental perceptions of diversity and level of volunteering among various groups but these data proved to be largely anecdotal. While the Board found these data helpful, it did not provide the Board with as much insight as the above data.

Community

The Larchmont Schools currently serve a community that extends from West Hollywood to east of Hollywood and from the Hills to south of Wilshire.

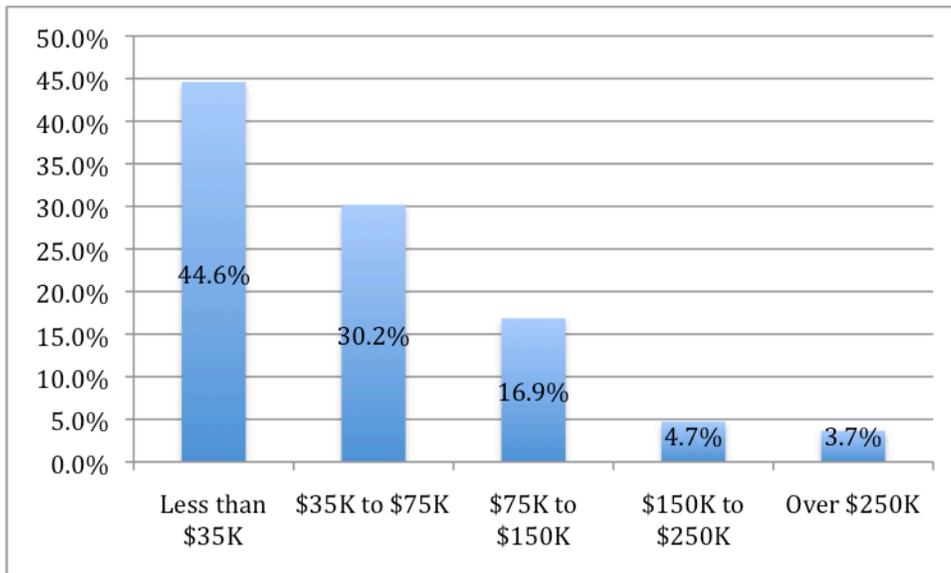


80% of the students we currently serve live in this broad community.

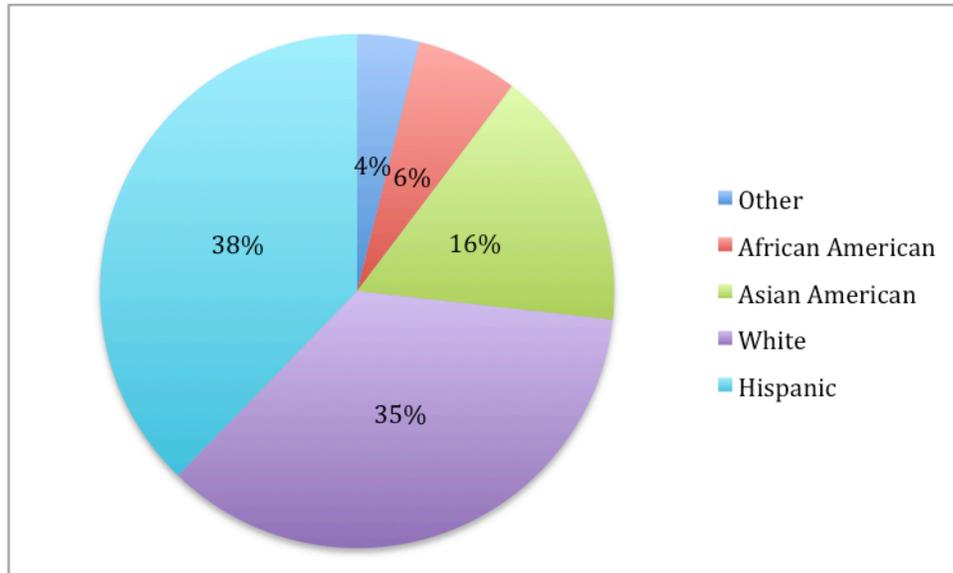
Zip Codes	Communities	LS Total	LCS	LCW
90004	Hancock Park	22%	25%	7%
	Park La Brea/Mid Wilshire			
90036	North	11%	10%	13%
90019	Mid Wilshire South	9%	9%	11%
	West Hollywood /			
90046	Hollywood Hills West	8%	5%	18%
90038	Hollywood (South)	7%	7%	4%
	Hollywood Hills			
90068	East/Bronson/Beachwood	6%	6%	7%
90027	Los Feliz/Silverlake	3%	4%	1%
90005	Mid Wilshire East	3%	3%	4%
90048	Beverly Hills Adjacent	3%	1%	10%
90020	Wilshire Corridor	2%	3%	1%
90069	West Hollywood	2%	2%	5%
90029	East Hollywood	2%	2%	1%
90028	Hollywood (North)	2%	1%	4%
TOTAL		80%	79%	84%

In this community, in which nearly 550,000 residents live, only 9 other charters besides LCS or LCW operate.

The federal definition of free and reduced price lunch is between \$33,874 and \$40,793 (for a family of 3-4). Just over 40% of the households in our community earn less than \$35,000 a year.



Race/Ethnicity – The racial and ethnic make up of our community is highly diverse. With the majority of the community identifying as either White or Hispanic, there is a sizeable Asian population and a small African American population.



Although the numbers above represent the ethnic/racial breakdown of the community at-large; they are almost identical to the ethnic/racial breakdown of children between the ages of 5 and 14 in the community.

Academics

Our Board discussion at the retreat illuminated some important themes. First, it is the Board's clear commitment to accept all children and serve them equally well regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, English language learner status, or special education status. We believe all children can achieve at high levels and are committed to ensuring that all our children do so.

Furthermore, the experience of our Board members at Larchmont and at other schools do not lead us to believe that students from different racial, ethnic, or socio-economic are easier or harder to serve; just that it requires a differentiated approach to serve all children well. We believe, and our experience confirms, the percentage of students who qualify for Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRL) at a school is not determinant of academic performance. Of the 36 schools whose API scores place them in the top 5% of all schools in LAUSD (and higher than LCS), 8 of them had a higher FRL percentage than LCS does; 5 of them had FRL population of 40% or higher.

We also see from academic data that we do a good job of serving children from all

backgrounds. In 2008-2009, LCS's API for students the state classifies as "economically disadvantaged" was 820. Also, almost all subgroups are outperforming their peers in traditional LAUSD by double digit percentage. However, we notice that while we have a negligible achievement gap in the early grades at LCS, it is a gap that widens over time for students at Larchmont. The fact that this achievement gap occurs while students are at Larchmont makes us believe it is within our locus of control to narrow and even prevent from happening.

Financial

We receive ~\$2,000 per pupil less from government sources than traditional LAUSD schools. As such, our ability to secure extra funding (from parents, the government, and philanthropic institutions) is critical to our success. The Working Group's research confirmed that our FRL families participate at lower rates and in lower amounts to site-based fundraising. That being said, there are 2 key pieces of data which are important to highlight that mitigate this. First, our FRL parents contribute to non-pledge drive site-based fundraising (e.g. jogathon and world's fair) at a higher rate than they do at the pledge drive. For the pledge drive, our FRL parents contribute 3% of total giving (vs 13% of total giving at Jogathon). Second, for every single FRL parent, we secure \$400 in Title I money from the federal government.

I attempted to build a financial model that took into account the Working Group data as well as the Title I data to try to size the financial implications of veering from our current course of 40%. Using actual 2009-2010 giving data, we found that even a swing of 10% in either direction (a 10% higher or lower concentration of students from middle and upper income families) would only impact the budget a few thousand dollars in either direction in the early years with a maximum projected impact of 1.4% on our budget over time. The model, for a variety of reasons isn't perfect and should be taken with a big grain of salt. That being said, it is worth noting that on the margins, a shift in FRL percentage away from where we currently are would not likely precipitate a financial "melt down."

Recommendations

My final recommendation on diversity therefore is largely to stay the course and set a target to have 40% of the incoming Kindergarten qualify for FRL. Similarly if and when we increase enrollment at a particular grade (e.g. middle or high school), 40% of the additional students should also qualify as Free and Reduced Price Lunch. Because roughly 40% of the households in our community qualify for free and reduced price lunch, because we have had the 40% FRL target for incoming classes for 4 years, and because the data strongly suggests that we can serve a population that is at least 40% FRL well, I think we should stay the course on our FRL target. It is important to note that given the fluctuations in the acceptance of our offers following the lottery and the legal advice given us by the premier charter-education lawyers in the state on how to structure the lottery and the waitlist, the Executive

Director will work with the Board to set a priority for the lottery that will enable the incoming class to be 40% on the first day of school. This lottery priority may or may not be 40%, but it will be set to ensure that the incoming class will be 40% FRL on the first day of school.

In regards to our racial/ethnic target, I think we should continue to hold to the general target of having our lottery pool being at least 50% non-white and leave it to staff to ensure that the racial/ethnic diversity of the lottery pool mirrors the communities in which they operate.

VI. COMMUNITY: BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY

Community Engagement and Social Responsibility are a critical part of our mission but up until now, we haven't sought to define and measure what we mean to have achieved this component of our mission successfully across multiple schools. In order to tackle this amorphous question, the community engagement subgroup created a list of questions that they thought would be particularly interesting to ask our stakeholders and similar schools, including:

- How do we define community?
- How do we define engagement?
- What successful community engagement practices exist in other school communities?
- How do the highest performing schools engage and monitor parent involvement?
- How has community engagement been measured in the past and was it effective?
- How do we/how would we like to measure community engagement?
- How do subgroups' engagement in our community affect the others (student, teacher, parent engagement is intertwined)?
- What are the types of outreach that will encourage community engagement in the schools?

They decided that the best way to engage our stakeholders was to conduct a survey to find out what parents, teachers and staff think about community engagement at Larchmont Schools. They also thought it would be especially important to learn from other charter schools in the Los Angeles area that are high performing and that operate under a charter similar to Larchmont Schools.

100% of LCW teachers, 85% of LCS teachers, and 16% of parents responded to the surveys. From these surveys, the group found that teachers and parents are deeply committed to teaching social responsibility and engagement and that many felt this was being done well. The group also found that there were only a limited number of examples that teachers and parents regularly shared in which community engagement and social responsibility were explicitly taught.

In surveying other schools, the group came across a wide range of engagement ideas, but there was no school that they felt identified measurable “social responsibility” or “community engagement” targets that we could model ourselves on.

As a result, the Group recommended (and I agree with) the following targets:

Social Responsibility: The group felt that we should have an explicit expectation of how social responsibility will be taught through the curriculum at all grade levels. Since this is such an important component of our mission, we should explicitly set a target around this. The education excellence recommendations above incorporate this feedback as teaching social responsibility is an explicit expectation in the project rubric. I feel that should sufficiently meet our objective here.

Family Engagement – The group felt that we did not have enough good data to measure how much family engagement was going on, how diverse that engagement was, or how effectively we were leveraging it at the school sites especially as our schools grow. The group recommends and I agree that we work to collect volunteer data this year and come back to the board next year with a recommendation on how much and what type of family engagement the board should expect.

VII. CONCLUSION

The recommendations presented for approval at the August 31 Board meeting are in alignment with what we have been doing at the Larchmont Schools for years. My hope is that the rationale for these recommendations is deepened and that we can provide greater clarity to our stakeholders (teachers, parents, and students) about how we define excellence and what we hold the schools accountable to.

Beyond what we approve on August 31, I know the Board hopes schools will go above and beyond the bare minimum expectations set forth in this document. As our various schools seek to leverage the strengths and talents of their teams and respond to the unique needs of their communities, we expect schools will set additional goals and targets. I feel though that when all our schools achieve the targets outlined in this document, we will be meaningfully on the path of transforming public education in our city, and across the country, by demonstrating that it is possible to have academically high performing public schools that are open to all and who serve a student population that mirrors the full diversity of our community.