



Transition to Middle School: Results of Focus Group and Survey Research for Pasadena Education Network (PEN)

Purpose

The purpose of the PEN Middle School Report is to identify ways for Pasadena Education Network (PEN) and Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD) to assist district families in transitioning to PUSD middle schools.

Background

In order to gain a better understanding of this problem, PEN administered an online survey to parents with children in PUSD elementary and middle schools, and completed focus groups with 5th grade parents and 6th grade parents whose students hadn't yet started a PUSD middle school, parents of students attending a PUSD middle school, parents whose students attended a PUSD elementary school, but chose not to stay in PUSD for middle school, middle school teachers, and middle school principals.

Survey and Focus Group Findings

This section shares the feedback we received from the survey and focus group participants. For results purposes, academic rigor includes factors that impact the quality of teaching and learning including class size, elective and enrichment opportunities, teaching, and instructional resources. Survey results indicate that the top concerns for PUSD parents prior to their child attending a PUSD middle school are: **academic rigor, social environment, safety/discipline, and facilities**. Once entering a PUSD middle school, parents ranked their top concern as **academic rigor and its related factors**, with all other concerns dropping significantly lower. *Figure 1* on the next page, shows how the perceptions of the parents changed before having their child enroll in a PUSD middle school and once they attend. *Figure 2* rates how much influence different factors had on their feelings about attending a PUSD middle school. *Figure 3* demonstrates that families who attend a PUSD middle school place a high degree of value on public education. In addition to the stated factors influencing decision-making, we discovered through our focus groups that parents view middle school through the lens of their own middle school experience.

Our surveys indicate that 76% of middle school parents rate their overall middle school experience as good or excellent, 14% said it was okay, and 10% said it was lacking.

Figure 1. Percentage of Parents Very or Somewhat Concerned about School Factors (Before and After Enrolled in Middle School)

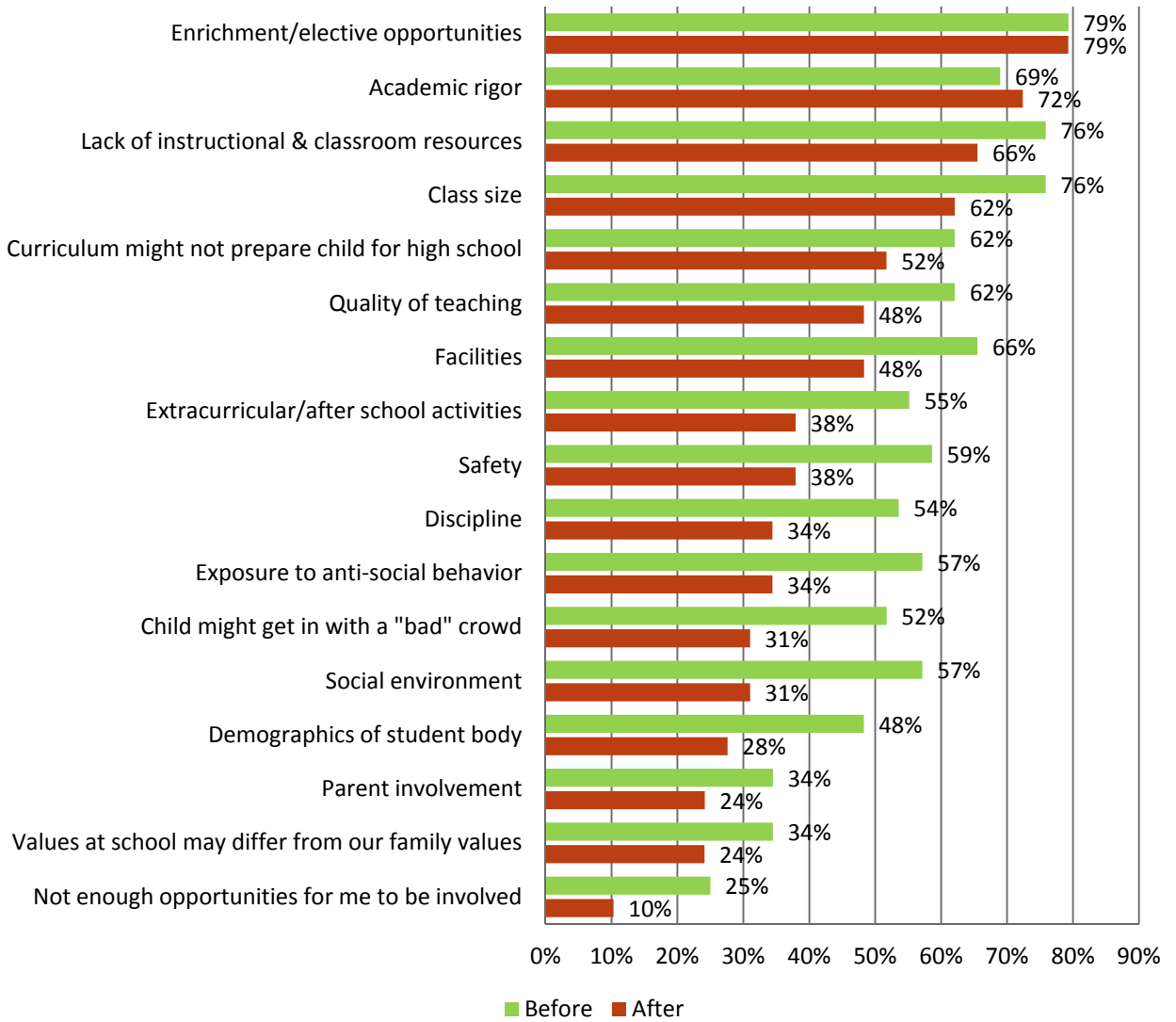


Figure 2. The Most Influential Sources that Influenced Feelings about Attending a PUSD Middle School (Elementary School Parents)

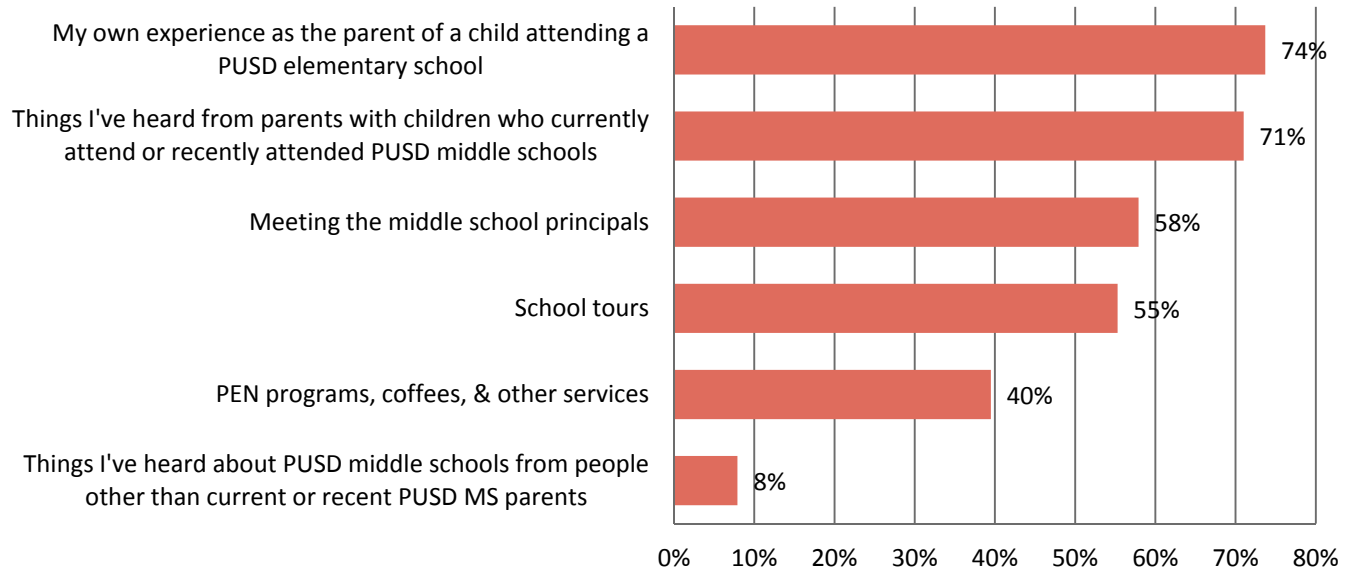
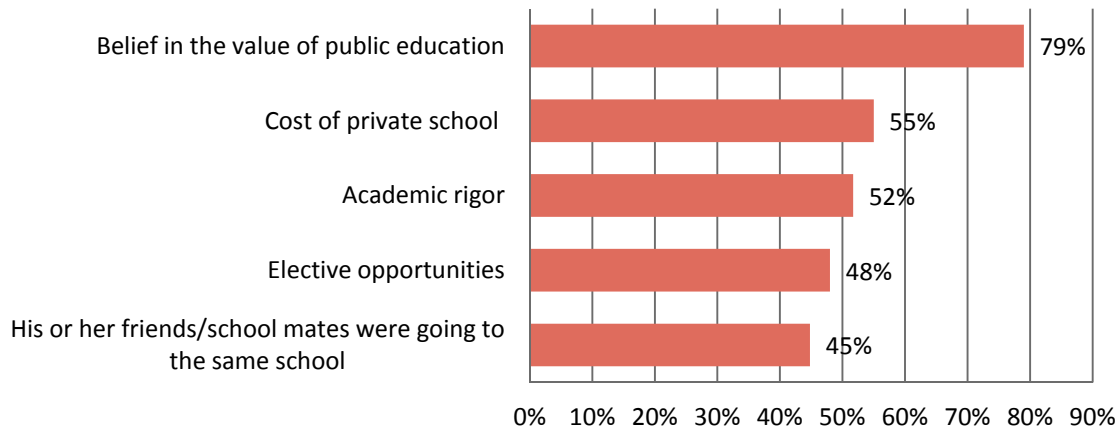


Figure 3. Top Factors Considered by Middle School Parents in Evaluating Whether to Attend a PUSD Middle School



Academic Rigor

Academic Rigor is a major concern of parents and is perceived as lacking in PUSD middle schools

- “I had to reteach many lessons in order for my kids to successfully complete their homework. I seriously considered home schooling because they weren't getting it during their classes.”
- “Her teachers set high goals for her, but there is little incentive for her to go above and beyond what most fellow students aim for.”
- “We don't want to see our child get an A on an assignment that we think is C work.”

Academic rigor was seen as an important criterion by parents in selecting a Pasadena middle school, and the only factor considered a “deal breaker” when considering PUSD middle schools. Parents defined an academically rigorous program as one that includes GATE/honors classes, a clear focus and vision (like Blair's International Baccalaureate Diploma program), a wide choice of classes and levels to allow a student to switch based on needs and interests, a challenging curriculum that prepares students for high school and college, and meaningful projects that require research, critical thinking skills, and teacher feedback. A culture of low expectations was a concern to each focus group – parents in PUSD, parents who left PUSD, middle school principals, and middle school teachers. Another recurring theme among all parents was that the 5th grade classes were not challenging for their students and they felt grades were inflated. They saw their students get A's on mediocre projects, and grow bored with their schoolwork. This influenced them as they explored their middle school options, and played a role in their final decision.

The focus group and survey results suggest a number of challenges to achieving academic rigor at PUSD middle schools:

- Culture of low expectations
- Large classes make it difficult for a teacher to differentiate for students of different academic levels (limited physical space also creates challenges)
- Bumping -- teachers moving around either to another school or to the district so continuity of teaching staff is disrupted
- Not enough writing and too much multiple choice testing
- Large class size prevents teachers from giving meaningful assignments and meaningful or timely feedback
- Limited classroom resources

- There is a focus on low and high-achieving students; middle achieving students get lost in the noise
- Curriculum standards and course offerings are not in line with child's abilities
- Not enough students to offer advanced classes
- Limited elective options
- Not enough adults for the number of students (less one-to-one time with individual students impacts learning)
- Not all students are motivated which makes classroom management challenging and less time is spent teaching
- Advanced students need meaningful, interesting work to stay motivated
- Meaningful teacher feedback is necessary for students to stay motivated
- Communication with parents is difficult with so many students in each class
- Low enrollment at middle schools limits the academic and elective options

Parents who did not send their children to a PUSD middle school said that the lack of academic rigor at PUSD middle schools was the major influence on their school choice decisions. Some parents believed that the academic pacing is slow at PUSD middle schools, others were concerned that teachers aren't able to differentiate between the academic needs of various students due to large class sizes, and others felt that the focus at PUSD schools is to increase the achievements of low-achieving students, while not assisting middle-achieving students rise or meeting the needs of advanced students.



SUGGESTIONS FOR PASADENA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (PUSD)

Parents and principals suggested the following ways that PUSD can increase **academic rigor** at PUSD middle schools:

- ❖ Have smaller class sizes and have small learning communities for each academic subject
- ❖ Go to a more traditional schedule with all classes meeting every day
- ❖ Assignments should be more engaging and involve critical thinking skills and hands-on projects
- ❖ Prioritize math at middle school and communicate clearly what math is offered and who qualifies
- ❖ Provide honors classes, an honors track or even an honors “test-in” program
- ❖ The general feeling is that if your child is in the pre-AP classes, they are ok, but in the general student population there is more classroom disruption, teachers lack control, etc.
- ❖ Enforce consequences that matter to the students for not doing their homework
- ❖ Provide more feedback on student writing
- ❖ Instead of having teachers just teach from the book, teachers should actively engage with students
- ❖ Encourage teachers to be open to change and willing to challenge advanced students
- ❖ Have teachers use parent portal to make information available to parents
- ❖ Mandate that teachers post homework and grades to the electronic reporting system
- ❖ Principals must have high expectations of the teachers, which will encourage teachers to have high expectations of their students
- ❖ Principals must support their teachers
- ❖ In terms of pacing, make it easier for teachers to make sure learning is taking place; there isn’t enough time to re-teach if students aren’t ready to progress
- ❖ Principals need to project their enrollment more accurately so teachers don’t get moved around.
- ❖ Can anything be done about last hired/first fired and bumping? Although it’s good for teachers when they are called back, they can select which school or grade they return to. This can cause problems at the school sites since teachers do not have to go back to their previous school or position, and bumping disrupts school culture and team building.

Electives & Extracurriculars

PUSD middle schools offer limited electives and extracurricular activities

- “There are only two elective choices for him to take and he's already taken art twice.”
- “Don't get your heart set on electives; there is a lack of choices. It's unfortunate because they hear about the cool electives their friends take at other schools”
- “Administrators in particular are overloaded with responsibilities and are rarely able to give attention to the extras--special events, enrichment activities, etc.”

Parents expressed concern about the limited offerings of electives classes and there were mixed reactions to the variety of extracurricular activities. One parent noted that having elective choices allows students to develop their interests. Parents also said that PUSD middle schools lacked interesting electives, such as a variety of elective courses, pre-AP classes, foreign language classes, or a competitive intramural sports program that competes with other middle schools. The elective classes and extracurricular activities that are offered at PUSD middle schools differ significantly between schools, hence the mixed response to after-school offerings. Some parents reported that they were happy with the number of after-school programs their students could participate in, while others expressed concern that there were few options for extracurricular activities.

There was a difference between the number of electives offered at private schools vs. public, and this had a significant impact on the decision parents made who left PUSD. Different philosophies were reflected by the parents: Some parents said it was easy enough for them to supplement what their child received at school with after-school enrichment programs, and others thought it was important that their child have those programs available at school so they would develop school friendships with students who had similar interests as they do.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PASADENA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (PUSD)

Parents suggested the following ways that PUSD can improve the **electives and enrichment options** at PUSD middle schools:

- ❖ Offer more elective classes and enrichment opportunities
- ❖ Bring back the robotics program
- ❖ Increase the number of foreign language courses available
- ❖ Provide additional after-school enrichment
- ❖ Offer more intramural sports programs
- ❖ Provide K-8 with same opportunities as the middle schools



Social Environment

The Social Environment is a major concern to parents because it impacts the Academic Rigor

- “Middle school is difficult for all kids, no matter what school they attend.”
- “Middle schoolers look scary because they get bigger and boys' voices change, however they are all still little kids inside. It's that transition time - tween time.”
- “Middle school is where your child really will be learning about interacting with all kinds of people.”
- “It's a transition for kids and parents. They're afraid of being bullied, how to use a combination lock, not having friends, losing their best friend because they go to a different school, not fitting in, not finding their class.”

Although parents are concerned about the social environment and the exposure their children may have to anti-social behaviors like taking drugs, drinking, etc., the level of concern drops once their children are in middle school. Instead of being concerned about the anti-social behaviors, parents are more concerned about students who aren't interested in learning since that impacts the academic rigor at the school. To paraphrase one response from PUSD staff, “parents want their students to be in class with students who want to read books, not students who throw them.” Academics and social environment are highly correlated. If too many students don't want to learn, that has an effect on the amount of teaching and learning other students can do.

Parents say they value diversity, and would like ethnically and racially balanced schools. They do not feel that some of the schools have that balance, and they aren't comfortable with those schools. That, combined with the way middle school students look, affects how parents perceive the social opportunities for their children at a school. Racism and classism exist among students and adults in our schools. In a district like PUSD, which has a large number of minority students, this creates a culture of low expectations. Judgments are made about a student's interest in learning based on the way s/he looks – clothing, race, hair styles, etc.

It is important to parents that they and their students have a peer group who invests in, and places a high value on, education. Prior to entering a PUSD middle school, based on their own experiences in middle school, they are concerned their child will get in with a bad crowd. Once in middle school, parents say their students find like-minded friends and their school is a happy place, however some students continue to fear being bullied, mean girls, and other behaviors typically associated with middle school students.

Parents note the following social issues:

- Students want to attend the same school as their friends
- Students cuss a lot and are disrespectful
- Family issues and poverty have an effect on a student's ability to be successful; we need to understand those struggles and help those students early on
- Peer pressure is less of a concern than expected
- Middle school students often have a drop in grades
- Middle schoolers focus on the boy/girl stuff not on academics
- Students are exposed to a lot
- Parent/child communication is more important than ever
- Middle school is difficult no matter where you go to school

SUGGESTIONS FOR PASADENA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (PUSD)

Parents suggested the following ways that PUSD can improve the **social environment** at PUSD middle schools:

- ❖ Have consistent and clear set of rewards and consequences
- ❖ Provide honors classes, an honors track or even an honors "test-in" program
- ❖ Create a logical feeder pattern from elementary school so cohorts can stay together
- ❖ Create bridge, shadow, and/or mentor programs so parents and students know what to expect
- ❖ Provide an alternative or technical program for students who are apathetic or disruptive
- ❖ Develop a culture of high expectations, but understand that not every student is college bound
- ❖ Staff should develop personal relationships with students
- ❖ Enforce a dress code

Safety and Discipline

Safety and Discipline is a higher concern for parents before entering middle school than after

- “More adults on campus. Kids this age need constant reinforcement to do what they should do.”
- “Bullying is a real problem.”
- “Zero tolerance should be just that -- if kids mess up and have bad behavior, in other districts they are kicked out. It seems like PUSD is only concerned with maintaining headcount instead of maintaining minimum standards of learning and behavior.”

Safety and discipline, though concerns, were secondary to Academics and Social Environment. The main issues that were specific to safety and discipline had a direct correlation to social environment. Racism, bullying, cussing, and other disrespectful behaviors were the most noted. However, parents who were in PUSD middle schools felt that the schools were, for the most part, handling these issues well. Parents who did not stay in PUSD for middle school said that the lack of adult supervision caused discipline problems on campus.

There was some concern about the consistency of the enforcement of disciplinary actions. For example, a child at McKinley might not have the same disciplinary action as a student at Eliot who engaged in similar behavior.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PASADENA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (PUSD)

Parents suggested the following ways that PUSD can encourage **safety and discipline**:

- ❖ Implement consistent and effective attendance and discipline policies
- ❖ Ensure zero tolerance policy is followed
- ❖ Have more adults on campus
- ❖ Create a culture of respect and high expectations

Facilities

PUSD Middle Schools are not warm and inviting

- “The grounds and facilities do not look as good as I would like. The football field grass does not look watered and the basketball court hoops are missing their nets.”
- “Compare when you go to a private school with the old PUSD buildings.”

Although not a huge issue, the way the PUSD middle schools look has an impact on the way parents “feel” when they enter the schools. Structurally, they are old and dark; some are portables. The main areas of concern were:

- No lockers is a big concern
- Drop off and pick up on busy streets
- Trash on campuses, especially after lunch
- Elementary schools look better than the middle schools

SUGGESTIONS FOR PASADENA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (PUSD)

Parents suggested the following ways that PUSD can improve **facilities**:

- ❖ Build newer restroom facilities for the students
- ❖ Ensure each child has a locker
- ❖ Reduce trash on campus
- ❖ Improve the nutrition of school lunches
- ❖ Construct a permanent middle school facility instead of having trailers
- ❖ Improve the look of the middle schools to be warm and inviting (“*spruce them up*”)

Why Do Families Leave PUSD after Elementary School?

'Opt-out' and 'opt-in' families share similar concerns about PUSD middle schools

Study results suggest that Pasadena families who opt out of PUSD middle schools share many of the same concerns as families that are considering or intend to stay at PUSD schools. The survey asked participants if they knew of families that had left PUSD after elementary school and, if so, what were the major concerns of these 'opt-out' families. Their concerns were:

- Academic rigor (not enough academic rigor; lack of other equally-motivated students and families; fear low academics will limit college opportunities)
- Class size (too many students in a classroom; decision to home school; ineffective principal)
- Discipline (lack of control over students; high teacher/student ratio)
- Facilities (dated; lacking compared to private schools)
- School quality (belief that private/parochial schools are better; didn't "trust" PUSD middle schools)
- School choice (student chose private/parochial school because s/he didn't get in to PUSD school of choice through Open Enrollment)
- School environment (perceived as "bad")
- Competition by other schools (private schools offer scholarships to their schools)

Families who opted out of the public school system echoed many of the sentiments expressed above. They described private schools, compared with public schools, as having more resources, smaller classes (or aides, so more adults), more individualized attention, more hands-on projects and engaging work, a more extensive breadth of curriculum (e.g., foreign language, arts, etc.), a cleaner and calmer environment, and a student body that also values education as much as they do. One respondent reported that their children say that the other students at their private school are friendlier, more polite, and have a more positive attitude.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PASADENA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (PUSD)

Parents who opted out PUSD suggested the following ways that PUSD can **encourage district families to stay** at PUSD middle schools:

- ❖ Increase the amount of resources going to the classroom
- ❖ Reduce class size
- ❖ Work with union to make policies so that good teachers can stay regardless of seniority, and make it easier to let bad teachers go
- ❖ Re-prioritize so not all monies go to non-classroom expenses and remedial students
- ❖ Create a real honors track or program and create alternative programs for students if they become disruptive

Other Suggestions

SUGGESTIONS FOR PASADENA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT (PUSD)

Parents suggested the following ways that PUSD can support parents and students in easing their transition to middle school:

- Be transparent about decision-making; involve parents in issues that affect them
- Talk about the realities of what parents will see this year and next year, not 5 years from now
- Increase communication with parents
- Treat parents like they are the consumers/owners since they are the top of the organization chart
- Keep website up to date
- Promote the good things that are going on in middle school and high school
- Advertise events widely (e.g., anti-bullying event)
- Improve technology for efficiency, communication, and student instruction
- Formalize “shadow” program as school tours don’t give an accurate view of the school (only a few classrooms are seen)
- Keep offering educational programs like the anti-bullying one
- Offer summer events so families and students are already comfortable with their schools
- Have middle school students and/or principal visit the elementary schools
- Develop feeder program so school communities can stay together
- Make tour times convenient for parents (have to pick up and drop off children at other schools)
- Increase push for parent participation

SUGGESTIONS FOR PASADENA EDUCATION NETWORK (PEN)

- “All parents need access to good information because they all say they want the same things for their children: go to college, get a good education, etc.”

The following are suggestions that PEN can implement to support families in making the transition to a PUSD middle school:

Community Outreach/Programs

- Organize event: Q&A panel with principals
- Organize event: panel of existing parents
- Organize event: social mixers between middle school parents and 5th grade parents (for parents who aren't comfortable asking questions in groups)
- Organize event: parent coffees with current middle school parents
- Work with PUSD to implement a formal student “shadow” program for 5th graders
- Provide opportunities for parents to see a classroom in progress
- Provide opportunities for parents to meet teachers
- Continue the Middle School Night with students, displays, pertinent information, and information about open enrollment
- Find ways for networking and regular communication among parents of same aged children and parents of slightly older children for support and mentoring
- Recognize that PEN is good for networking among community members; parents know each other
- Encourage parents to visit middle school campuses to see that the schools are clean and graffiti free
- Continue this work regarding transitioning and apply it to high school. That is where some parents have the most concerns.
- Encourage all Pasadena residents to send their children to public school instead fleeing to other options.
- Encourage Principals to lead all school tours

SUGGESTIONS FOR PASADENA EDUCATION NETWORK (PEN) CONT...

Providing Information to Parents

- Educate parents about parent portal and how important it can be so that parents can put pressure on the teachers to use it
- Provide facts that demonstrate why a PUSD middle school could be better than a private alternative, not just an acceptable experience for a low cost
- Teach parents what to ask and look for as they attend school tours
- Provide more information on how 6th grade is structured
- Include discussions that are not geared only to the high-excelling kids. Parents want to know about the quality and opportunities for basic level classes
- Educate parents about honors options and Pre-AP classes at all schools
- Explain what is the same and different among the middle schools
- Explain the value of parent/teacher relationships and parent involvement
- Share what the middle schools are doing to improve their test scores, etc.
- Provide side by side comparison of the middle schools (ie: programs/clubs, number of AP classes, average number of students in a class, etc.)
- Share ways in which parents are involved at the middle school level
- Leverage parents feelings about themselves – proud, public education value, value diversity, this is who I want to be
- Put middle school students in front of parents and students
- Connect 5th grade parents with middle school PTAs, etc.

Working with PUSD

- Work with the district to make sure parents are considered in decision-making
- Work with PUSD to create logical feeder program so friends can stay together
- Encourage PUSD to adopt a well-rounded middle school experience that includes high academic standards taught in engaging and interesting ways, and balances that with a lot of interesting opportunities for social development
- Facilitate the information flowing between district and parents
- Provide elementary school principals with accurate information about the middle schools because parents ask them which school they should attend
- Continue to work with district on open enrollment
- Have parents push for smaller class size (no more than 30-32 for middle)
- Help district make thoughtful, rather than knee-jerk decisions that don't fit into an overall plan and therefore end up not being successful
- Work with the district to be creative about keeping great teachers
- Lobby for better teacher evaluations to move poor performers out faster