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Executive Summary: February 2024 Parent Focus Groups in the Chappaqua School District

Total Participants: 45

- **Elementary Parents: 43**
- **Middle School Parents: 6**
- **High School Parents: 16**

Situational Overview

Over the past year, the Chappaqua School District has experienced a series of antisemitic incidents and concerns expressed by the community, including the appearance of Swastikas, complaints about the inclusivity of Jewish celebrations and the Jewish community, and heightened fear and unfortunate experiences following the Hamas terror attacks against Israel on October 7. This culminated in a letter from over 400 community members to the school district. In response, the district engaged AJC Westchester/Fairfield to provide faculty briefings and to conduct parent focus groups to better understand and address these concerns.

AJC Westchester/Fairfield, a regional office of the American Jewish Committee, the oldest Jewish civil rights organization in the U.S., was asked by the Chappaqua Board of Education to conduct two short briefings for school faculty that highlighted current antisemitic trends per its annual report on the State of Antisemitism in America. Subsequently, per the request of the Board of Education, AJC facilitated a series of focus groups to gather detailed feedback from parents on their and their children's experiences in the district. The School District was responsible for inviting parents to the focus groups, and school officials did not participate in the focus groups so that parents could speak freely. A protocol of questions was developed and shared with the School District to ensure continuity across all focus groups and the ability to assess core information from the perspective of parents and their students. The discussions from the eight focus groups held over three days revealed several areas for improvement between the community's experiences and the district's responses, particularly in terms of communication and educational content.

Themes and Impressions from Focus Groups

Parent and Student Experiences: Parents participating in the focus groups described choosing Chappaqua for its educational excellence and community spirit but expressed the feeling that the district has sometimes failed to provide a safe and supportive environment for Jewish students. Concerns were particularly pronounced regarding the district's DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) initiatives and framing, which many feel

have mischaracterized and neglected to include Jewish students. Parents expressed gratitude to the Chappaqua School District for undertaking this effort and listening tour and the opportunity to participate in the in-depth focus groups, and they greatly appreciated the opportunity to openly express their fears and concerns, as well as suggestions.

Jewish parents in the focus groups (particularly those in Middle School and High School) described that they and their students have felt uneasy and at times alienated, with their fears and lived experiences often dismissed by those who do not understand how personal the attacks are and how real the fear is that the Jewish community is experiencing. The theme that “dealing with antisemitism is the cost of ‘doing business’ for students” emerged over and over again, raising deep concerns for the lived experiences of a wide number of Jewish students.

Parents expressed the desire to work in partnership with the schools and the School District, and numerous parents spoke proudly of their volunteer involvement with the schools and wanting to help ensure a safe environment for all students.

At the same time, several concerns were raised across the focus groups about a seeming confusion about authority between the PTA and professionals.

Curriculum Concerns: Significant dissatisfaction was voiced about the Middle East curriculum and DEI framing, with specific criticisms of materials being misleading or inappropriate. Parents are particularly concerned with how historical and current events, like the Holocaust and Middle East conflicts, are taught and whether materials have been assessed for bias.

Communication Gaps: Participants in the focus groups expressed a perceived inconsistency in how antisemitic incidents are communicated within the district, leading to confusion and mistrust among parents. The need for clearer, more consistent communication from the district was a recurring theme.

Parent Suggestions

Reevaluate DEI Framework: Parents encouraged the district to consider a comprehensive review of its DEI framework to ensure it is inclusive and accurately represents all community groups, including Jewish students. Parents expressed significant concerns about an over-obsession with “what (racial) box one fits in” when so many people do not neatly fit one box or definition. Significant concerns and frustrations were raised DEI (Diversity, Inclusiveness, Equity) framing, that the focus on an “oppressor/oppressed” model, which does more to alienate parents and students and create confusion and potential conflict rather than understanding and belonging.

Curriculum Review and Transparency: Parents requested more transparency regarding curriculum content, particularly concerning sensitive topics like the Middle East and historical events such as the Holocaust. This includes better vetting of materials and more open access for parents.

Enhanced Communication Strategies: Participants suggested that the district should standardize its communication approach to ensure timely and consistent dissemination of information about curricular changes and incident responses.

Community and Parent Engagement: Participants stated that a more proactive engagement with parents and community members is needed. Suggestions include the creation of more interactive forums that provide parents the opportunity to communicate with the school district such as roundtable discussions and open dialogues to foster a greater sense of partnership and understanding.

Outside Interference by Organizations Supporting Hate is a Concern: Participants described that the ability of an outside organization that supports views and organizations far outside the mainstream to participate or be represented in school events or school district meetings has caused deep mistrust and hurt within the Jewish community and safeguards should be considered.

Review Educational Materials and Training: Participants called for a thorough review of the educational materials used, particularly with respect to Social Studies and Middle Eastern Studies, and lessons and themes that deal with historical injustices and current events. A majority of parents asked for deeper review and assessment of materials to ensure they are balanced and inclusive, to ensure they do not only approach the Middle East from a conflict perspective, and to review the materials and supporting materials and their sources.

Overall: Parents deeply appreciated the ability to participate in these interactive conversations, championing the opportunity for more. The feedback from the focus groups underscores a deep respect by parents for the school professionals and their roles, while at the same time highlighting a need for several systemic changes within the Chappaqua School District to address the concerns of the Jewish community effectively and to foster an environment of true inclusivity and respect for all students. Parents expressed the concern that many people are unaware of the fear and prejudice that the Jewish community experiences, and the trauma that the Jewish community has experienced, particularly after the October 7 Hamas terror attacks. During the focus groups, parents expressed the need for proactive educational practices and community engagement to foster a safe and respectful learning environment. Parents across the focus groups discussed the need for the school district to review and enhance curricula and training for faculty to better reflect and educate about Jewish history, the contemporary Jewish experience, and antisemitism. These discussions highlighted the intricate balance needed to effectively understand and address antisemitism within public schools, emphasizing the importance of short-, immediate, and long-term strategies to build understanding, respect, and inclusiveness among students and faculty.