

Clara Barton Open School

Changing School Options and a Strategic Role for Barton

Presented by the Barton Leadership Council on behalf of the entire school community
March 23, 2009

The Barton community supports the district-wide goals reflected in the Changing School Options planning of using limited resources efficiently, delivering high quality choices for Minneapolis families, and better serving the achievement needs of our city's most school dependent and vulnerable learners (i.e. narrowing the achievement gap). We propose here a set of strategies that support the district's current reform efforts and will strengthen and improve Clara Barton Open School.

Clara Barton Open School is a healthy and dynamic school community. Its success is rooted in an exceptionally long tradition of progressive teaching practices, exemplary family involvement, and a highly stable teaching and administrative staff. As a magnet Barton provides families a unique program - open education. This philosophy and style of teaching builds a curriculum tailored to individual learning styles and developmental needs. It views hands-on learning and direct experiences as foundational. It values student academic choice and strives to balance the arts, sciences, and humanities. Families, however, choose Barton for a variety of other interdependent reasons as well, including the excellent teachers, the high achievement levels, the K-8 program, the visible parent involvement, and the racial and ethnic diversity of its student body. The location itself is a draw. Its proximity to Lake Harriet, the Rose Garden, and other park areas contribute to the curriculum and regular walking field trips. The building has been thoughtfully adapted over the last 27 years to enhance the open education philosophy. The facility has space for small learning environments and a common area for regular all-school meetings and performances. The school has a strong partnership with the neighborhood, which has financially and programmatically supported it. It is the sum of these parts that makes Barton a unique and successful learning environment for students and their families.

Given this learning environment, we believe that the most effective way Barton Open School can serve the district-wide goals is to continue as an open school magnet program at its current location. Barton's Leadership Council, comprised of parents and staff, with enthusiastic support from the larger parent community, developed the following recommendations to address district goals and strengthen Barton Open School. The proposed solutions fall into three areas:

- 1. School assignment policies to increase Barton's economic and racial diversity;**
- 2. School assignment policies to give some priority to families living closest to the school;**
- 3. Funding and programming recommendations to improve the learning outcomes of English Language Learners.**

1. Student Assignment Policies to Increase Barton's Economic and Racial Diversity

We believe that changes to the procedures for how students are assigned to the school could have an immediate impact on increasing our economic and racial diversity. Barton School is currently 35% students of color and 65% white students. We are 20% free/reduced lunch and 10% English Language Learners (primarily Somali students). We recommend increasing our school's economic and racial diversity through the following policy changes in the enrollment/student assignment process:

Make No Spring Student Assignments on the Basis of Projected Withdrawal

We propose that no spring assignments to the school be made on the basis of projected summer withdrawal (which is the current district practice). We (along with all schools) have our greatest mobility from families who are living in more economically stressful situations. In addition, we lose a few ELL families each year when they choose better/safer housing situations that come available in the suburbs. When new students are assigned to the school in the spring they are more likely to be from white middle class families

who have mailed-in a School Request Card by the district deadline. These students are frequently replacing lower income students of color and/or ELL students who leave in the summer.

If spring student assignments are made on the basis of real openings only (not projected ones), late summer and early fall assignments could then be drawn from ELL families and from families coming through the Choice Is Yours program. Over time our economic and racial diversity will increase. The goal would be to move toward an ELL program of 100 students (13%), a free/reduced lunch percentage of 30-35% and a racial mix of 50% students of color and 50% white. Although this will still not reflect the racial and economic demographics of Minneapolis as a whole, it will be a much more diverse mix than is present in many neighborhoods and in most schools today.

2. Student Assignment Policies to Give Some Priority to Families Living Closest to Barton

Reserve 10-15% of Kindergarten Openings for Neighborhood Families

Barton has historically been situated in an open attendance area. It is our understanding that the district plans to eliminate all open areas with redrawn attendance boundaries for designated community schools. As a magnet program with a teaching/learning philosophy as its foundation, we believe that a guaranteed attendance area based exclusively on proximity could potentially undermine the philosophical integrity of the educational program. We propose instead a school lottery process that reserves a predetermined number of kindergarten slots for families in the selection pool who live in the area closest to the school and who want to attend Barton.

The “proximity priority” assignments would be made following the general lottery by selecting students from the wait list who live in the designated neighborhood area. The district could also “guarantee” that the next 5% of students on the wait list from the proximity area be moved to the top of the over-all wait list for the school. After placing these students from the wait list in the summer or early fall, the Barton list would keep its original lottery order inclusive of all attendance areas within our boundaries.

3. Academic Achievement and Improving the Outcomes of English Language Learners

Barton School is committed to narrowing the achievement gap. We not only expect to be held accountable for the achievement of all our students but feel strongly that our legacy as a learning community should be tied closely to how well we serve our most school dependent learners. We have had a long history of seeing increased levels of achievement for all groups of students the longer they are in the school. The recently published growth measures for MCA results for our 7th and 8th graders demonstrate this consistent achievement pattern of growth and increased proficiency over time. We see the instructional strategies and professional development opportunities that have emerged from the district’s involvement with the Institute for Learning as central to our own school’s continuing journey to better meet the needs of diverse learners. We recognize further that improved strategies for differentiation, language development across content areas and more extensive family involvement will be essential steps for us to increase the academic achievement of ELL learners.

Our school has lived with inadequate levels of ELL funding support since the program’s inception; thus we are cognizant of the fact that our ELL students also need more individual and small group support than we have been able to provide in the past. To that end, we applaud the recent district funding decision that allocates ELL teaching positions directly to schools to cover minimal levels of service for ELL students. We urge the district to see this as an essential first step and to continue to look critically at the unique staffing demands that small ELL programs pose in K-8 buildings. As we increase the numbers of students we serve in the ELL program and as we increase our economic diversity, additional funding will potentially follow

these students. We recommend that additional transition funds continue to be available to support small ELL programs until the numbers of students served generate sufficient dollars from other sources.

ELL students, as well as others who come to school already behind their peers, require additional instructional time beyond what teachers can provide during the school day. We encourage the district to assist early start schools in providing after school buses at reasonable times so we can support quality after school programs for our neediest learners. With students dismissed at 1:45 PM, the earliest we have been able to get after school buses has been 4:45 or 5:00 PM. This is too long a day for students and has been a major roadblock for us in developing the extra instructional time they need through an after school program.

If the cost of after school buses continues to be prohibitive, we would like to explore the possibility of a partnership with another school in the Southwest area that could include Barton ELL students in their after school program. We see the district's strategic planning process as an opportunity to develop such a collaboration that could not only better serve the needs of our ELL students but also use district resources more efficiently.

Summary

We are hopeful that the district's goal of creating an effective and sustainable school system for the future will see an important role for Barton Open School. Barton's continuing mission is to offer Minneapolis families and teachers a progressive child-centered program that is inclusive and supportive of all learners. We welcome the opportunity to serve an increasingly diverse student body. We feel strongly that we can contribute to the long term health and vitality of the district by building on our strong traditions of exceptional family and school collaboration and by creating a teaching-learning environment that better serves the needs of all our learners.