

SUMMARY
Community Building Conversation
January 21, 2010

Question 1: What are ways you have connected with other people at Argonne?

Top 7 answers:

1. *Classrooms/Class activities* [11] – fieldtrips, classroom events, art in action
2. *Informal interactions* [9] – drop off/pick up, walking to school, talking to other parents
3. *School events/organizations* [9] – PTO, Mayfair, Friday assembly
4. *Volunteering* [6] – Beach clean up, helping with sports, art in action
5. *Formal school communications* [5] – List servs, Tuesday folders, bulletin boards
6. *After school programs* [3]
7. *Children* [3] – birthdays, friendships, preschool connections

Comments

Every group reported making positive connections at Argonne! These answers identify places where community is already taking place. Simple next steps would be to build on these already existing successes:

- Add community-building efforts (like bagels and coffee) to morning drop-offs once a month
- Use the newsletter to highlight volunteers, school programs, classroom activities, “hidden communities” already happening at Argonne
- Better volunteer follow up and a wider range of volunteer events

Parents often reported feeling a greater sense of community in their classrooms than in the larger school environment (especially with the younger grades). The question is how to build on that and expand it.

Questions 2 and 3: What would you like to see changed or enriched at Argonne so we can build a more inclusive community? Solutions for the challenges mentioned?

Top 6 areas to target for change:

1. More social time where families can connect/ Community can be built
-Suggestions: More Social Events (Potlucks, Playdates, Sports, Events for Parents, Performances by Children)
2. Change the PTO meetings/ governance structure
- Suggestions: Make the PTO more social, fun, and inclusive
3. Build better bridges across cultures/inclusion (Address the Different Argonnes, Improve outreach, Better Support Families of Children with Special Needs)
- Suggestions: Build a more cohesive and inclusive Argonne community
4. Improve communication between parents and teachers/ school and families
5. Create a culture of participation
6. Improve welcoming/orientation of new families

Comments: This is an opportunity to see what is working and what is not. The key is to try not to be defensive, but to listen with fresh ears and look for solutions. Everyone is coming from a place of wanting to make Argonne even better! Effective change will require the buy in of school leadership, teachers, the PTO, and parents.

What’s next? The people who participated in this event want to know what's next and how to continue these community building efforts. We don't want to lose the momentum

SMALL GROUP ANSWERS

Question 1: What are ways you have connected with other people at Argonne?

1. Classrooms/Class activities [11]

- Field trips (2)
- Potlucks
- Art in Action
- Making homework packets for the class
- Classroom events for the holidays
- Rm 103 events in the classroom
- Being in school. Being in the classroom. Really helpful.
- Overnight field trips. There's nothing else like that. You really get to know kids from other classes. The more we do as a team, it helps.
- Taking pictures of the class
- Involved parents in the classroom

2. Informal interactions [9]

- Drop off and pick up
- If I see someone I don't recognize, I try to connect or at least get a name.
- I have liked getting to know teachers. Connecting with them. Not sure how it happened.
- I find the staff very helpful and welcoming in getting to know others – I like to hang out in the office talking with Grace, Miss Denise and enjoy the informal interaction with parents in that setting.
- Being in school. Being in the classroom. Really helpful.
- Conflicts can also bring parents together. If you are having a problem you may connect with other parents discussing the issue.
- While walking to school we met other parents
- Coming early getting to know the kids / parents.
- Visiting local merchants – many parents work in the neighborhood

3. School events/organizations [9]

- PTO Meetings (2)
- Mayfair
- Friday assembly
- Field Day (2)
- This community building event
- The K-play date at beginning of year (summer) was excellent.
- Fundraising events

4. Volunteering [6]

- Beach clean up
- Parking fundraiser
- Helping Bill coach a kickball game
- Emailing people regarding the website
- Art in Action (4 of us taught last year, which led to lasting friendships & we see each other outside the classroom)

5. Formal school communications [5]

- Yahoo Group list serv and also Room 107 list serv
- Tuesday Folder
- Teacher (Ms. Thayer) weekly newsletter
- Bulletin boards outside the office
- Class room lists (with parents' contact information)

6. After school programs [3]

- After School Program(s) – My son is in one of the on-site ASP's, so I also see families of children in the other on-site programs. (3)

7. Children [3]

- Birthdays
- My children's friendships
- Preschool connections

COMMENTS

- There is a direct correlation between parents being present at the school and a child's grades.
- It would be good if we could make it easier to be around at Argonne. Could be a morning bagel thing, or evening thing too for those parents who can't be here at pick up.
- The tone that is set by the teachers (re. parents presence in classroom) is so important. Those connections continue with the kids since the teacher has set the tone to include the parents.
- Is there less parent participation in the upper grades because the kids that don't want the parents around more or is it the classes, teachers, etc.?
- Upper grades, more focus on you're not little kids anymore, you're getting older and should be more independent. This is good and but can be bad when it's extreme (i.e. no parents allowed).
- Parents looking for a school are interested in a welcoming community that is involved in the PTO
- K-1 class not as connected – kids and parents socialize more in their own grade
- It is hard to make a connection when the only time you are at the school is for a late pick up from the YMCA

Questions 2 and 3: What would you like to see changed or enriched at Argonne so we can build a more inclusive community? Solutions for the challenges mentioned?

1. MORE SOCIAL TIME WHERE FAMILIES CAN CONNECT/ COMMUNITY CAN BE BUILT

- People felt connected to their classrooms; but not strong beyond classroom level; how can we make those connections happen beyond the classroom?
- We need to create more opportunities for families to get together
- There's no real effort to create a community; only a drive to get volunteers currently
- There should be a sentiment to just have "fun"; a sense of cheer-leading instead of business-like PTO meetings
- People feel it's important to just to get to know each other without any "agenda" or "obligation"
- We need to facilitate more interactions among people to have a greater community at Argonne.
- Informal opportunities allow parents to connect with each other as well as formal ones.
- If we start with the social stuff and the sports stuff, then more will come.

Suggestions: More Social Events

General

- We should have a consistent Argonne event (social based events; open-armed; more people to be included in the Argonne community)
- More evening events not just community building, but something more casual – music, plays, skits, poetry reading, or child presentations (Talent show anyone?). Parents are more likely to come if their children are participating.
- Having things available in the evening would help working parents attend
- We might need to introduce some games that force (encourage?) folks to interact and meet new people.
- Activities could range from basketball games for dads to cultural events to school performances
- The more events the more people are likely to come.

Potlucks

- Have a monthly potluck. The kids are here, running around, why not have dinner together? It builds community. It would be easier if we did it more often. It can get a little nuts since the kids get so excited.
- Every month a potluck hosted by a grade-level. Great. The food tonight was great. Why not do it? Kids are there together and it's better than cooking at home.
- Continue the multicultural potluck

Playdates

- A classroom playdate. Maybe at Golden Gate Park on a Saturday. Some place where children can meet and run around and the parents can meet each other.(2)
- Another K-playdate. The first one was one of the best opportunities for parents to meet for the first time and having a second K-playdate would be fun.
- First 5 grant has money for another event.
- What if we had a standing monthly playdate – community day
- Rent Daily City Playhouse for a playdate event

Sports

- Sports are really good community building activities. In the private school world they have teams, i.e. soccer, basketball, etc. Parents could be together and have coffee together every Saturday morning on the soccer field.
- For immigrant parents, some might not have the courage to enroll their kids on a team. Start with something simple.
- Was just in China and didn't see any soccer fields, but people do play Ping pong and badmitten. This would be very easy to do in the multipurpose room and inexpensive. However, there has to be a want.
- Maybe create an Argonne team for soccer or other sports

Events for Parents

- K pub crawl – night out for parents
- Classroom adult night out. A bon fire, meet at cha cha chas, bar, café, whatever. It would be classroom based. So reach out to a particular class and have the parents go out and you get to know each other.
- Speaker series would attract parents. Talks on “planning for college” or other interesting topics.
- Forming some kind of single parent group. Their children find themselves attracted to other children from single parents.

Performances by Children

- People want to see their kids perform. Performances bring parents out and are an opportunity to build community.
- Combining potluck with a child's performance. Many people come out for performances.

Other Ideas

- Early morning breakfast once a month with parents
- Family math night or bookmaking.
- Have a spring concert at night.
- Musical lessons given by volunteer parent (not rely on teachers so much).
- Sports nights for parents or parents and kids.
- Ice skating or roller skating event.
- Baking contest or desert night.
- Celebrate cultures. Have an event celebrating people's heritage.
- Have a movie night or a bingo night.

2. CHANGE THE PTO MEETINGS/ GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

- There is a sense of exclusivity with the PTO
- The PTO meetings seem “corporate” and uninviting. Not welcoming. Too business like.
- The school is on the cusp of the old guard and the new transitional governance. It comes up year after year that the governance doesn’t work like it used to. This needs to be addressed. They spent days coming up with the new structure and its time to do it again. It’s not working but it’s better than nothing.
- Everything was committee run and came back to the larger community. It took a huge amount of time with the committee meetings and then brining it back to the larger level. There is no consistency for teacher participation in the PTO. It was like a constitutional convention that created something that works within the reality of the time that people have to donate. People around the table, people already giving a lot of time (outside of the requirements in the bylaws... in the classroom, etc.) so they don’t have time to also participate in so many meetings, etc.
- Also people cycle through, the nature of it, so no organizational memory.
- [The PTO] never really seemed to be well functioning.
- PTO should represent the demographics of the school – leadership should represent school community. PTO mostly white, school is only 23% white (2)
- ELAC is supposed to be a committee of the PTO and since everyone has limited time and the need to participate in 2 groups is hard.
- Supposed to be not traditional PTA but a PTO where both parents and teachers doing it together.
- Timing of PTO meeting does not work for many. Parents have to rush from work, feed kids, often haven’t eaten.
- People have volunteered but nobody followed up with them; there's a lack of coordination.
- Field day/ Mayfair: I gave my name and never heard back. People want to help but never got called back. They felt discouraged.

Suggestions: Make the PTO more social, fun, and inclusive

- A new time and format could increase participation.
- Have PTO meetings on a Sunday night or weekend late afternoon/evening. Avoid the rush and stress of having to get home from work, put kids to bed etc.
- Make them a movie night for the kids and meeting for adults.
- Pot luck dinner at PTO meeting. Make them half social to build community and half business.
- Fundraising is important – building more community important - and being more social may help fundraising.
- Have food and drinks at all the meetings and events
- PTO meetings with some flair that thank volunteers and encourage more volunteers.
- Maybe talk at the same time as eating (vs. potluck first then talking). We could direct people to sit together in the cafeteria and talk while they eat so that it doesn’t take up so much of the evening.

3. BUILD BETTER BRIDGES ACROSS CULTURES/INCLUSION

Address the Different Argonnes

- We should keep in mind that this feeling that there are two Argonne's, the set that come and are involved and the other that isn't involved (either they don't feel welcome or don't want to). Some cheerleading that has to happen within the communities.
- This separation is the most disappointing thing about Argonne. There seem to be actually three communities. A community of white Argonne families, a Chinese or Asian Argonne community, and a group that is simply uninvolved. There's even a separate governance structure with ELAC. We basically have two different institutional communities. Some go to both meetings and this is a lot so most have to choose. It interesting that this separation isn't felt (as much) amongst the kids.
- The school is not prepared to deal with people of color (especially African American)
- People of color do not feel needed or wanted.
- Cross cultural issues are definitely there, but it's not just about white parents and Chinese parents, etc.
- African American and Latino students/families have reported not feeling welcome. The school from the administration level down should strive to be more inclusive.
- Atmosphere not welcome to African American community. The school seems to be Asian and White only. There are few African Americans or Latinos.
- Need to bridge the language obstacle. Picture yourself in another country where you don't speak the language and are trying to be social.

Improve outreach

- A little disappointed that tonight there are so few people of cultures other than white English here. We each need to ask one or two people to come. Mass communication doesn't seem to work.
- Many ethnicities are not coming to meetings. We need to welcome and bring in all communities.

Better Support Families of Children with Special Needs

- Children with special needs not advocated for or supported at school – parent felt alone and not supported.
- District and Administration seem to point fingers at each other blaming for insufficient response to special needs kids. No action was taken without a threat of action.

Suggestions: Build a more cohesive and inclusive Argonne community

- Social events can help welcome people of all ethnicities. Food and music bring people together. "Everyone speaks food"
- Occasions that I've been in the classroom there have been other Chinese parents present in the classroom, so in that way there seems to be more balance participation.
- Work from the kids up. Much more mixing of cultures there.
- Coordinate efforts with the Social Justice curriculum. This would be a way to involve parents on top of administrators and students.
- Continue to translate material into Russian and Chinese and Spanish (3 languages). All school documents should be translated into all three languages.
- Translate the website into those 3 languages
- Have mentors for families with kids with special needs.
- Advocate for a PTO at the district level for special needs kids.

4. IMPROVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARENTS AND TEACHERS/ SCHOOL AND FAMILIES

- It is good to have strong communications with the teacher.
- There should be consciousness about what teachers try to achieve in their classrooms; events should tie into classroom themes instead of taking time away from classroom.
- If the teacher asks parents directly i.e. help with a field trip, they often will. But something like this, which is just social, it doesn't fly as well.
- The Yahoo group was good.
- So much time/energy was spent on creating/updating an Argonne website. We should have a conversation about which technology venue to use (Website or Yahoo group) in the interest of reaching most people.
- For some, they might take the first step to get involved in the classroom but might not take a second step of the school in general.
- Each class needs a room parent even if the teachers don't want one.

Suggestions:

- The best way to get people to do Art in Action is ask them directly. That should be true about this as well – somehow put that together with the respect for the teachers' authority.
- Rally for a room parent from the very beginning. And have them call for events. Don't let the parents leave from back-to-school night without choosing [a room parent].
- What about room parents asking each family directly? Also a room parent rep that went to the meetings to represent them and can bring info back to the class.
- Facebook... supposed to be 16, but some kids are on. What about a facebook page for classrooms?
- The school should have an anonymous suggestion box.
- Keep people informed of when events/meeting are

5. CREATE A CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION

- More of an emphasis on volunteering.
- Volunteers may come more naturally if there is more of a sense of community
- You can't force people to do things. There needs to be a desire to participate. Some miss things (work, night classes) to be here since it's about our kids and their school is more important.
- Some communities may care about school and student performance but not really see the importance on parent involvement. When the culture says that the teachers are the authority, there is a feeling that [parent involvement] should be left to the teachers and the administration.
- Sent son to school for two years over seas. Was glad to come home. Likes to participate and change things, and felt that she couldn't do that there. Not her culture. The system was working but it's not my way and I can't change it and that's hard. Back home, much easier. However, when given a certain level of assistance, could participate.

Suggestions:

- We expect families to give money. Why not say that we also expect people to attend at least 2 meetings a year? Set up the expectation.
- Be more forceful as a teacher to encourage parents to attend.

6. IMPROVE WELCOMING/ORIENTATION OF NEW FAMILIES

- New parents should have a “welcoming” committee. New parents need a person or mentor to ask “stupid questions.” What kind of backpack do I get, where do we drop off, pick up.
- We need to form some kind of new family process; those who transfer into Argonne to help them adapt to the environment

Suggestions:

- A parent handbook could help answer these questions. This information could be on the website and in order to save paper a small brochure could direct new parents to the website to get many of their questions answered.
- Could we have a place to ask questions on the website or an email address to ask questions?
- Put out a guide of parents and kids, who they are. A literal facebook with a photo of each parent and the kids. A student parent directory so when you see someone you know who they are.
- Rosters with parent emails

7. OTHER

- Integrate K more with other grades
- Security is an issue. The gates are always open. Adults come and go. It is a serious issue that should be addressed.
- Many paraprofessionals in school not suited or interested for working with kids.
- Topic of ability to request classrooms. The fact that it is allowed is bothersome. There is a big inequity from classroom to classroom. Get rid of the parent request. Those that aren't good at doing that don't get the good classrooms. Agree that it's not a fair system. Put it on the table to potentially get rid of. You just get assigned.

Other suggestions

- Make list of local merchants with Argonne connections
- Lots of kids on their way out saying oh! Potluck! Wanted to stay. A child being picked up from Chinese after school wanted to come in, but since they didn't have anything to contribute to the potluck the mother wouldn't let the kid go. Need to find a way to be more inclusive. Maybe include info in the invite that you don't NEED to bring anything, come anyway.
- People who participated in this event want to know what's next and how to continue the community building efforts. We don't want to lose the momentum