

Statement from BEN on Cancellation of November 5th Panel Discussion

The Government's consultation process about parent involvement in Public Education continues to raise some interesting issues. At Bermuda Education Network, the process has caused us to do a lot of thinking about public engagement and what we can contribute to expand the conversation. As the result of this process we have decided to cancel our November 5th Panel Discussion.

So how did we come to this decision?

As soon as the current consultation process began, we reached out to our members and supporters asking them to speak out on governance and accountability issues. We attended Town Hall meetings, contacted PTAs and visited schools, posted on our website and Facebook page and called parents, teachers and principals asking: "Are you satisfied with the status quo? Now is your chance to deliver feedback to Government about parent involvement in running schools!"

The response was fairly limited and we decided that this meant two things – firstly a need for awareness raising and secondly, while many parents and community members want change in our education system, most of them don't want to speak out in case they are in the minority or are uncertain how to speak out in a way that will add value to the conversation.

Initially we were puzzled by the fact that so many people could admit that they were dissatisfied with the status quo, but were hesitant to take a public stand. We've since found some commentary about different types of citizens that helped explain this. Westheimer and Kahne describe two kinds of citizens "participatory" and "justice-oriented" in their influential article, "What Kind of Citizen" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 239).

Participatory citizens believe that:

"... to solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures..."

While justice-oriented citizens believe that one must:

"... question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time."

While initially BEN took a more justice-oriented approach, we have come to understand why many in our community tend towards participatory citizenship. However, where the 'issue' relates to community involvement in schools, there is

a considerable need for capacity building in both categories as currently no one is holding the education system accountable.

Bermuda Education Network is taking both a short and a long-term view on this. In the short term, we will continue to connect with other groups (PTAs, non-profits and trade associations) in order to provide them with the tools they need to pick up the advocacy mantle.

In the longer term, our plans for the coming year will include initiatives to promote citizenship education. Few people would disagree that there is a profound civic empowerment gap in Bermuda as large, and as disturbing as the achievement gap in Math and English: schools should be addressing this gap. The following statement made about the US, could just as easily apply here: “Citizens with low or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government, while the advantaged roar with the clarity and consistency that policymakers readily heed” (APSA Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy, 2004, p. 651).

Bermuda needs to help our young people to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives. That’s how we’ll ensure that when it’s their turn to participate in a government consultation about a social issue, they have the skills, knowledge and attitudes to do some real problem solving.

Moving forward, BEN will carry on developing our network of organizations so that we can continue to do what we do best, which is offer student enrichment and teacher development by bringing together public schools, businesses and community volunteers.

Thank you for your continued support in the Bermuda Education Network!

The BEN Team