

Pocantico Hills Day Camp Report

Prepared by the Pocantico Hills Camp Committee

October 4, 2004

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I. The Pocantico Hills Camp Committee — Objectives

The Board of Education appointed an advisory committee in July 2004, to explore ways to enhance our current summer program. The committee members were comprised of a cross-section of parents, staff and administration. Parent participants included out-of-district families, elementary and teen group parents, district grandparents, as well as families that had left the camp and returned.

We met in general session five times over the course of two and a half months, and also in smaller groups, i.e. teen, grades 2-5, and Pre-K-1, to better evaluate our own camp and the facilities from an appropriate developmental standpoint. We visited 25 camps in the area and evaluated them on matching criteria: *Process, Safety Procedures, Staff, Content, Communication, Marketing, Enrollment, and Evaluation*. Two meetings were held to tour and meet staff members in our own camp while it was in session, as well.

Our role as a committee was one of observation, comparison and recommendation. The culmination of our efforts is represented in the pages that follow.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dr. Thomas Elliott, *Superintendent*
Gloria Colucci, *Asst. Superintendent*
Nancy Golodetz *School Board Liaison*
Carol Imrich *Camp Director*
Dania Davey *Committee Chair*
Kerry Dall
Ruth Tedder DiLorenzo
Marcia Finsmith
Alyssa Jacobs
Pat Kringas
Michele Stine

II. The Pocantico Hills Day Camp — Overview and Observations

Overview of our Camp

The Pocantico Hills Day camp has been in operation for over fifty years, and is seen by many as an integral part of the community experience of Pocantico Hills. In our weeks of study we have met with many people who have related warm memories, have felt that they grew up in the camp and were first exposed to many new opportunities that have enriched their lives. Many of our present campers' parents attended when they were children. Because this camp is also about the children that grow up in the camp and return to work as CIT's and counselors who become role models to the younger children—community spirit is enhanced and fostered from generation to generation. When talking to campers themselves, many of the most popular things in the camp are activities in which they interact closely with their counselors. This interaction is a unique mentoring program—counselors, leading by example, into the next stage of responsibility and growth.

Carol Imrich, the director, leads the staff. Carol has served the camp in many capacities; 23 years as a counselor, 9 years as assistant director and 4 years as director. She also holds a master's degree and has New York State teaching certification. She has two assistant directors, Tom Micucci and Chris Fiore who manage a support staff of 102 people including senior and junior counselors and counselors in training (CIT). Of this staff, 14 were new and 88 were returning staffers. This represents a remarkably high percentage (86.3%) of repeat staffing, and is particularly interesting in light of the fact that salaries seem to be somewhat below industry standards.

Also, the diversity of fine facilities to which our children have access was a real standout in comparison to other programs in the county—from the Olympic-size pool and tennis courts to the fishing pond and 2,000 acres of woodlands and fully equipped shop and kitchen facilities

Another noted benefit was our camp's developmental philosophy that builds one year on the next, culminating in our very popular teen program. Year to year, the programs are specifically designed to supplement and enhance the activities of the school year without repetition. In summary, the activities planned for each summer are designed with the following ideas expressed in the welcome brochure and paraphrased below:

- *to have fun, and create a safe environment; foster cooperation, while developing group skills and mutual respect*
- *encourage participation and try new things even if you risk failure*
- *develop a sense of judgment and encouragement by providing adult and young adult role models*
- *encourage a zest for life, adventure, and accomplishment while breaking down unwholesome social barriers that act to isolate, inhibit growth and undermine confidence*

* *All in a nontraditional learning environment outside of the classroom.*

Observations of our Camp

- Developmental Philosophy – (one-year builds on the next)
- Exceptional value for money providing an affordable district camp
- We're at the right size for our facility (capacity 350-370)
- Our facilities
- Teen Camp
- Camp trips are different from school-year trips
- Mentoring, unique to community
- Academic support in reading and math
- *Esprit d'corp* of staff members
- We continue to surpass Westchester County health requirements.
- According to our health inspector we have one of the most highly trained staffs in the county
- 86.3% staff retention year-to-year although we offer lowest salaries and stipends surveyed
- Strong parent population willing to volunteer and be tapped

III. Camp Study Guidelines — Established by Board of Education

To add structure to the committee’s investigation, the BOE established a series of guidelines for our study and response that were presented at our first general session and accepted by the committee. These guidelines are in the areas of:

- Enrollment page 6
- Enrichment 7
- Safety 9
- Competitive Comparisons 10
- Community Input 11
- Budget 12

Camp Mission: *To leverage the unique Pocantico School and area resources to create a safe, enriching, and memorable summer experience for all Pocantico children that parents and children will want to return to year after year.*

Committee Objective: *Assess the current camp to identify opportunities for improvement to achieve the camp Mission.*

We have aligned each of these objectives with recommendations that follow.

Committee Guidelines aligned with Committee Responses:

ENROLLMENT

- BOE Guideline: *Residents and non-residents. Preferential camp benefits (i.e. tuition, busing) are desired for residents.*

Committee Response:

The total enrollment for 2004 was 349 children. Of which 243 were district residents and the remaining 106 campers were comprised of grandchildren of residents, non-resident children, and children of employees.

Preferential camp benefits include low tuition with scholarship programs available for residents and free in-district busing.

Camp staff and administration agree that we approach capacity at 350 to 370, which puts us in the “right-size” range for this year with the potential for limited growth. *It should be noted that this right size estimate is based not only on ideal staff to camper ratio but also on capacity of the facility itself to accommodate the enrollment.* It should not be concluded that an increase in enrollment could be compensated for by an increase in staff alone.

With additional publicity from both this study and good word of mouth about this year’s camp experience; along with projections for 2004-2005 school enrollment estimates, the camp should be able to accommodate some increase in enrollment next year. Care should be taken in the solicitation of out-of-district children so as not to exceed capacity. Year-to-year budgets should ideally include contingencies to supplement the camp budget in the event of significant increases in district registration and the need to cut back on the number of out-of-district residents.

ENRICHMENT

- *BOE Guidelines: Enrichment should include physical activities and use of all school facilities, both academic and recreational. Academic enrichment should be actively explored to encourage reading, writing, etc. throughout the summer months. Investigation of incorporating mandatory “summer program” as part of general camp experience to improve performance for targeted students. Inclusion of area resources should be considered (Stone Barns, Sunnyside, Jacob Burns, Hudson Valley Writers’ Center trips, etc.).*

Committee Response:

School facilities are extensive and well utilized in general (with suggestions for increased usage noted further in this report).

We offer remedial programs in math and reading during the camp day, but committee consensus is that because the community camp children go to school in the same building, it should be not be perceived as “school” in the summertime. Other specialty schools are available and better suited for children who wish to study areas of specific academic pursuit. Currently, the sense is that the camp is a “break” from school. Each year, however, we recommend that the staff remain flexible and inventive with regards to the programs it schedules and that staffers with particular skills or education be encouraged to propose “specials” to be introduced into the program at intervals within the camp week. Also, there is potential to hire professionals on a consultant basis while camp is in session to add diversity.

The committee suggests use of neighboring facilities, i.e. Stone Barns, Jacob Burns Film Center should be explored more fully.

PreK-K swimming skills are often below parent expectation at camp's end. Parents are concerned by amount of time children are restricted to the baby pool.

Reports on each child’s swimming progress and in other skills throughout the camp term has been requested.

Older children— most notably members of the swim team— (which numbers between 70 and 90 annually) do not seem to be adequately challenged by the level of instruction available in their mandatory swim lesson periods. Consideration should be given to creating more advanced instruction to accommodate these experienced swimmers, i.e. stroke training clinics, synchronized swimming, diving and regulation water polo. This is especially important for grades 4 through Teens.

Tennis facilities and instructional opportunities appear to be under utilized, although many parents have expressed interest in a more extensive tennis program. This year tennis and athletics were scheduled simultaneously, with athletics being very popular amongst the campers because of its camaraderie.

We recommend that consideration be given to either rescheduling tennis so that it is up against a less popular activity or that it be mandatory, pending community approval, using a benchmark model that the Squire's camp finds effective. Squire's requires swimming lessons three days a week and tennis two days a week during the same time period.

Issues regarding the tennis program also follow observations regarding the pool facility and instruction. Traditionally, weather permitting, all children are in the pool twice daily, (morning swim lessons 5 days a week and free swim every afternoon) which puts the pool and its teaching staff at capacity and limits staff availability for instruction in the morning. It also limits the staff's ability to deal with primary grades which require a very low teacher/student ratio for safety purposes.

We recommend that scheduling flexibility be considered, perhaps again using the Squire's benchmark model, to seek ways to make more instructors available to the primary levels and hopefully accelerate early learning in the process.

SAFETY

- BOE Guideline: *Safety is a top priority and all aspects of safety should be benchmarked (Board of Health, drop off/pick up, training of staff, etc.)*

Committee Response:

Safety continues to be the #1 priority of the camp program. Under the guidelines of the Westchester County Health Department camps are inspected and policies reviewed twice annually. We continue to surpass county health requirements.

- As set forth in the guidelines, camps are required to have one staff member trained in “*Responding To Emergencies*” for every 200 campers enrolled. We continue to surpass these requirements having 11 staff trained in and certified in the highest certification level of “*Responding To Emergencies*”.
- Classes in first aid (adult and child) and CPR were offered in June and 23 counselors were certified at that time.
- All lifeguards (20) have received first aid and CPR training.
- We were also fortunate that two of our athletics counselors were *First Responders*, which is the highest level of emergency training and is similar to that of Emergency Medical Services workers.
- According to our Health inspector, we have one of the most highly trained staffs in Westchester County.
- Renewed diligence has been implemented in the areas of off-site supervision and monitoring

COMPETITIVE COMPARISONS

- BOE Guidelines: *Comparisons of several area camps (schools, specialty sports camps, academic enrichment camps, and other features such as lunch, trips, etc.) to be completed. Full comparisons of tuition, content by grade level, counselor selection and training, scheduling, etc. should be included.*

Committee Response: Visits and meetings were conducted at 25 camps throughout the Westchester area divided into the following categories: Town Recreation Camps, Teen Camps, Sports Camps, and Private and Specialty Camps were investigated using a standardized comparison chart to record all information. For detailed comparative survey results, see Addendum 4 (pages 26-47).

COMMUNITY INPUT

- *BOE Guidelines: Input should be solicited from several areas: Current camp director, counselors, parents and campers enrolled in camp. Past participants in camp who are not currently enrolled and are participating in other camps (i.e. “left the camp”) to understand why and if changes were made, their likelihood to return. Active solicitation on past “unsatisfied” participants to be included to ensure all views of community are represented and leveraged. Special attention to gather all the unique and wonderful elements of the current and past camp activities and environment that make Pocantico unique and support “Pocantico Pride”. We want to hold onto those aspects that make our camp experience unique vs. a “cookie cutter” approach.*

Committee Response: Much discussion was given to the suggestion that a detailed survey be mailed to the community at large with regard to the above guidelines. As camp progressed, however, it became clear that the current camp was being well-run by its staff and well-liked by its campers and parents. Therefore, the committee reached consensus that the camp would be better served by focusing on the existing camp, its strengths and weaknesses rather than rehashing old issues, many of which may have already been resolved through numerous changes that have been affected by the staff over the last four years. Section IV of this report focuses on these strengths and suggests opportunities that we observed to build on the camp’s already successful platform.

Annual evaluations at the counselor level have been a useful part of the process for several years. The committee recommends the establishment of an annual evaluation to be completed by camp parents at the end of each camp term. This evaluation will help the administration and staff better understand how the community feels about the camp experience and continue to build on successes, on an evolving basis. The first evaluation will be mailed in early October. The administration will manage this. The cover letter and evaluation are attached. (see Addendum 3, page 23).

BUDGET:

- BOE Guidelines: *Cost comparisons by camps to be completed and cost per week equivalency. Camp “run” vs. outsource to be considered although preference is for camp led program. Legal implications, etc. to be included for all options. Understanding of camp tuition vs. area camps and willingness of participants for increases for camp based on new programs to be assessed. Opportunities to generate revenue from camp operation should be considered. Minimum goal would be to “break even”.*

Committee Response:

One area to be aware of for the future is that as the popularity of the camp increases, the amount of non-district students may have to be cut back to maintain the “right size” benefits and serve the community to the fullest. In layman’s terms, we have to insure availability to district residents while being aware of how a shift from higher, non-resident tuition to resident tuition amounts will affect the overall budget.

While the District Administration has encouraged that the Day Camp be self-funded, the school district has continued with Board approval, to supplement the Day Camp for the cost of the scholarship children that are enrolled in Day Camp. These students are determined by their eligibility for the Federal Free Lunch Program. During the summer of 2003, 26 children attended under scholarship and there were 32 scholarship campers during the summer of 2004. As demonstrated by the comparison of budget against actual expenditures, staffing and purchasing are restricted accordingly if the actual enrollment numbers are less than projected. The resulting final expenditures are lower than the anticipated budget. (See Addendum 2, page 21)

As a public school district, Pocantico Hills is not permitted to make a profit in its charges for services. If the District continues to cover the cost of the scholarship students in the school budget, the break-even point for Day Camp would require that the tuition and field trip revenues fully cover the camp expenditures minus the cost of the scholarship students.

The Day Camp Committee has also examined the New York State regulations concerning the school district’s ability to contract or “outsource” services as a means of controlling costs. The regulations for purchasing require that any contract that is anticipated to exceed \$10,000 must be put out for public bid and awarded to the lowest responsible bidder. The school district is not permitted to award a bid to a particular contractor if there is another responsible vendor meeting the specifications at a lower bid amount.

IV Camp Assessment — Marketing, Management, Process, Content

The Camp Committee has assembled a list of areas in the camp that we feel need greater study and development. They fall into four core areas:

1. Marketing
2. Management
3. Process
4. Content

1. Marketing

Area for development:

Need for a consistent camp identity and a marketing plan

Recommendations:

- Create and strengthen our communication tools through use of a logo or camp brand to be used on all camp related materials i.e. marketing brochures, applications and parent mailings
- Develop a more detailed camp description and an expanded note from director that includes the camp philosophy and its structure
- All camp marketing materials need to arrive earlier to parents than in previous years
- Revisit pre-opening camp orientation to include all new parents and anyone who wants to participate in the event. This event can be a vehicle to promote the philosophy of the camp, so parents go into the programs with focused expectations

Best Practices and Ideas:

- Develop and maintain the website updated throughout the year and possibly incorporate the camp newspaper. Website would serve to enhance all of the above and provide real time information to parents about trips, activities, scheduling etc.
- Establish the use of an annual, end-of-season, camp evaluation (see Addendum 3, page 23)
- Create early interest in the camp
- Establish “early bird” payment incentives based on how early you sign up and slight penalties for late-comers. This helps the camp get a better sense of head counts early on to facilitate staffing and program development

- One camp we visited also charged a cancellation fee. (This past year, our camp lost a great deal of non-resident children very close to opening day and as a result, had to rearrange programs and eliminate some counselors late in the process.)

Area for development:

Access to and processing of camp information is limited and outdated, data is difficult to manage and process

Recommendation:

- Evaluate technology needs for the program (computers, printers and software) to facilitate implementation of above marketing recommendations
- Establish designated camp computers to provide data, accounting needs and public information as needed and train necessary staffers to access software

2. Management

Area for development:

Ongoing administrative support to the camp director

Recommendation:

- Review job descriptions of camp administrative staff with an eye towards delegation and a division of responsibilities
- Review relationship between pool and camp management
- Review disciplinary policy management and establish published chain-of-authority for staff at all camp grade levels especially as it relates off-site management
- Examine salary structure vs. camp comparisons for possible increase in salary
- Consider the possibility of a dedicated administrative assistant to help Carol throughout the calendar year to develop programs, and implement changes particularly in support of the marketing recommendations above

Best Practices and Ideas:

- Participate in Tri-State Camp Consortium for staff and administrative development, and sharing of “best practices”—this should include Director and possibly both Assistant Directors

3. Process

Area for development:

Camper drop-off and pickup policy seems inconsistent and what can be a very lengthy process on normal days becomes worse on rainy days with counselors directing traffic outside during severe storms

Recommendation:

- Although it continues to improve, the process needs to be continually evaluated and modified to insure success

Best Practices and Ideas:

- Adopt the use of last name cards that parents display in the dashboard to streamline camper pickups
- Consider establishing a cordoned off area where parents who want to stay to use the pool can park and walk to pool eliminating danger of people walking in between cars and cones setup for afternoon pickups
- Rainy day pickup policy and arrangements need to be established and published in welcome brochure
- Explore possibility of having buses park further along driveway so as not to block parents entering or leaving the grounds by car

Area for development:

Documented community input and feedback

Recommendation:

- Annual camp evaluations to parents at close of each season to compare successes and need for development year to year
- Consider adding the above mentioned evaluation to camp web site in the future

Also consider:

- Reviewing the process of **collecting fees** for trips and specials — possibly including such fees as a separate line item in the up-front tuition to help reduce paperwork and streamline the budgeting process. Thought should also be given to establishing fee structures by grade or section level to reflect actual costs
- Revisiting **camp orientation** to include all new parents and anyone who wants to participate in a pre-camp event
- **Bike trip parents** need more information ahead of time

Content

Area for development:

Schedules can be tightened in order to free-up time and develop richer content.

Recommendations:

- Consider need for more creative scheduling and options, i.e. rotations for younger campers; expanded swim choices (*see below*)
- Enhance camp activities already in practice, for greater enrichment, i.e. more hands-on work for campers in Home Ec and less reliance on packaged foods; try to limit use of videos to occupy campers' time
- Consider instituting project scheduling within the “specialties”. Explore feasibility of rotating projects that seem to repeat from year to year, i.e. tissue paper on glass jars, and “shrinky dinks” . New ideas might include scrap booking, model airplanes, and chess
- Explore idea of lunchtime “clubs” as weekly occurrences that mix children in different grades who share similar interests or an expanded lunchtime to include quieter “camper’s choice” activities such as a lunchtime book club
- Consider reestablishing a public event for parents to attend, with an eye to extending variety show to the general public
- Possibly extend swim instruction opportunities for swim team members, i.e. synchronized swimming, advanced stroke training, diving
- Review lack of participation in tennis program and the need to develop program that addresses a variety of skill levels
- Cultivate existing partnerships between the Stone Barns and the Jacob Burns Film Center
- Explore possibilities for expanded use of Fergusson Lake

Also consider:

- Linking three different “specials” already offered in camp i.e. sew a colorful canvas sail in *Crafts* ; put it on the wooden boat you built in *Shop*; sail the wooden boat, with the colorful sail, on the pond in *Nature/Wilderness*

Note:

- Although the idea of a full day Friday was discussed in committee, we bring it to the School Board as an *information only* item. We were not able to reach a clear consensus to make this a recommendation.

V. Summary and Next Steps

The committee would like to leave you with these thoughts:

We hope that a significant number of these recommendations can be acted upon starting in 2004, so that the 2005 camp can continue to build on this year's positive experience with the help of our findings.

We also feel that the issues of technology and support staffing should be seen as a first priority before tackling other recommendations, as implementation will greatly facilitate growth and development elsewhere in the organization. Also, we recommend flexibility and openness to reinterpretation of the ideas herein based upon the results of the first annual parent evaluation that the camp is mailing in early October.

The committee will be happy to provide more detailed explanations in areas where further explanation is needed.

We recommend the establishment of a permanent advisory panel to outlive the existing camp committee that meets once a year to reevaluate programs.

Camp administration should report back to the school board and advisory panel during the first year:

- in January on progress made
- at end of May to see how changes have affected the camp process
- in mid September as results from the camp evaluation are tallied and Carol begins to prepare her camp report to the board and evolve the camp for the following year

We thank the Board of Education for inviting us to participate in such a focused forum, and it is with much pride that we submit our findings and recommendations. We have all come away with a renewed sense of understanding and appreciation, realizing how fortunate we are to have such an operation as part of the Pocantico experience. The suggestions and recommendations included in this report should be viewed as enhancements, building on what we have in place while retaining the unique culture of our camp.

—Gloria Colucci, Kerry Dall, Dania Davey, Ruth Tedder DiLorenzo, Dr. Thomas Elliott, Marcia Finsmith, Nancy Golodetz, Carol Imrich, Alyssa Jacobs, Pat Kringas, and Michele Stine

**Please Note – A copy of this report, including enrollment figures, budget review, and competitive camp comparisons is available to view in the school library.