

Bigelow PTO Meeting

Friday, January 24, 8:30am

Present: Todd Harrison, Ted Everett, Carolyn Judge, Julie Bourgoin, Leslie Williams, Miriam Alandydy, Liz Natale, Kim Buckton, Bithyah Israel, Stacy Schwartz, Beth Newman, Lorraine Johnson

School Committee Members: Ruth Goldman, Margie Ross Decter, Diana Fisher Gomberg, Angela Pitter Wright and Superintendent David Fleishman

Introductions

PTO Announcements

-Thanks for support of magazine drive. \$3700 raised to underwrite 8th grade trips to New York and Quebec.

-Thanks for support for buy-a-book.

-Thanks for support for the annual appeal: exceeded goal by \$2000.

-Next Wednesday is Teacher Appreciation Lunch: please see website for details and to sign up. Can also drop off items the night before at Stacy Schwartz's house: her contact info is on website.

-PTO is doing cookie dough fundraiser again this year: proceeds will go to Dailey Smith Scholarship Fund. It will start right after February vacation, with delivery well before Passover

-March 22: Big Night/Big Easy: at New Art Center

Will feature live Zydeco band, Mardi Gras theme, Southern food.

All are welcome for this adult evening. Silent auction needs donated items.

There is online sign-up for tasks still available.

Principal Harrison's Report

-Thanks to the PTO for early and successful fundraising, which has gone toward accessories: headphones for computers and laptops and cameras for 4-1-1 news program and yearbook.

-Thanks to Angela Pitter Wright for Bigelow Geography Bee announcing. It was a great competition. Students answered questions in front of 500 peers.

-MLK celebration was Monday. Bigelow's turn this year. An 8th grade speaker. Numerous kids submitted essays for the publication. Kids sang in the troubadours and treble singers. A great event.

Questions for the PTO

Q: Is the magazine drive still available? There was a delay in receipt of some postcards.

A: Yes, go on website and click the link. Proceeds will still go to the PTO.

Magazines should start coming in 6-8 weeks. Sorry for the postcard delay.

Superintendent Fleishman's Report

- We have a deep bench of school committee members here: 4 of the 8 members.

- Diana Fisher Gomberg: The School Committee oversees policy for the whole district. Other tasks: Deliberate and vote on the budget each year. (The budget cycle begins in March).

Negotiate teacher contracts. Hire Superintendent. Community outreach and communication.

- Angela Pitter Wright: All are welcome to meetings. Next meeting Monday at Ed Center 7pm. Committee meets twice a month on second and fourth Mondays. If you need to reach them, the online email address goes to all committee members.

-If you have a concern, Cindy Bergan is the person to contact after you've contacted the school and before contacting the superintendent.

Superintendent Fleishman:

-About school closings for weather: The recent Globe article summed up the tension. On Wednesday they made a mistake in forecasting, which these days is rare. We used to wait till the morning to make the call, but now forecasting is so good sometimes we are able to make the call at night. On Wednesday a number of teachers wouldn't have made it in. There's new research by a Kennedy School professor who says it's worse for learning when you have those days you go ahead with school, yet so many students and teachers are out anyway. The next day you have to get everyone back on the same page. So educationally it's not so clear.

-Successful Override last year:

As a result, we hired middle school teachers.

At Day: hired a whole team. Moved all Cabot students to Day. Bigelow will not be overcrowded down the road. This year in Bigelow 6th grade: plenty of time for students to get to know the teachers. Reasonable class sizes.

We added teachers at high school level. Next year will add more.

Next year a smaller senior class is leaving than the 8th grade coming in.

The principals have said we have to do something about the high schools. We have enough space, but not enough adults working in the building.

We've added more technology at Bigelow and in all middle schools. That was a priority. The extra money received from the state and other places was invested in technology. Teachers want more, especially in middle schools, and more technology that's working. There is more work to do at the elementary level. (See the recent Globe article about this).

-On the Academic front: we're in the in final phases of MCAS. A letter will go out next week about the end of MCAS. We are piloting a new assessment this year that will happen in the next year or two. It's called PARCC: a new assessment being used in 18 states based on Common Core standards. It will measure critical thinking. Will have to use technology in these assessments (will be taken online). Bigelow is piloting the test in 2 classes in 8th grade math.

Randomly selected the classes. A letter will go out about this.

At the elementary level it will be tested in 2 classes per grade. Principals will choose the classes. New assessments are going to be a challenge. Testing is not going away. But for this test there is no way to “teach to the test,” no way to “cram.” It’s integrated, testing on multiple subjects. A link to the PARCC site will go out.

-Social and emotional learning. Middle school years are tough. At home and school. At Bigelow, by the administration and guidance, there’s a lot of work to be done. Also by health classes, small groups. At NNHS there was a session yesterday on body image where Liz Walker spoke. Next month will be a session on Suicide Prevention. The Youth Summit will be held February 5th. And the Just Think event will be February 4th (snow date).

Questions for Superintendent Fleishman

Q: Concerned about bullying, a healthy emotional climate in the schools. We need an ounce of prevention before the stress that is always simmering can get worse.

A: Very sensitive to this, and the mental health issue generally, though can’t speak to specific incidents. Any particular incident should be reported immediately to the teacher or school administration and an investigation will take place. If you’re not satisfied, the next person to contact is Cindy Bergan.

Q: What about homework policy? There are countries like Finland that have reduced student workload. Too much homework can interfere with family life. Can’t see the benefit of 3 or 4 hours of homework per night.

A: Yes Finland is a different place. They have no poverty, they are not testing like we do. Our kids need to read and write and home to be prepared.

Todd Harrison: There are homework recommendations in the Parent Handbook. It is a constant balancing act. The kids are heterogenous. What’s the right amount? Teachers are aware of the stress level, and can extend deadlines or modify assignments as needed. Students can talk to their guidance counselor and/or teachers. The teachers learn what the line is [between too much and too little homework] over time.

Angela Pitter Wright: It seems like 8th grade homework has backed off a bit. Why? Are these students going to get harder in 9th grade?

Todd Harrison: For one thing, math has shifted. Students are doing more solving of problems, but fewer problems.

David Fleishman: Some of this is the result of the Common Core. Not quantity but quality.

Todd Harrison: As kids get closer to 8th grade there is less spoon feeding. We want the kids to be challenged, but have to be sensitive. We have more staff training now about social/emotional learning. The Override funding allowed us to increase the school psychologist to full-time. She also works with teachers.

Jessica Minahan gave a workshop on stress reduction and anxiety, we contracted with Mass General through a grant and sent 6 teachers to that. In health class the students are learning techniques for stress reduction.

The Youth Risk Behavior Study showed that stress levels are high. At the next PTO meeting there will be a speaker on this.

Q: About technology. What will happen with training and iPads? What software will be used for Special Ed students?

Todd: We got a tech infusion over the summer with the school committee funds. As for iPads, teachers will integrate it more and more. The training follows the equipment as it arrives. Some "pioneers" train the rest of the staff. If an IEP requires the technology, it will happen.

Q: On the MCAS "report card" the Special Ed kids don't seem to improve.

David Fleishman: One value of these tests is that shows our achievement gaps. How to help the students who struggle? We are working in reading, and in lower grade interventions. And with new technology. The new assessment (PARCC) will be harder for some students.

Q: What about quick typing? What if students know the stuff but can't communicate it online in PARCC, a timed test?

David Fleishman: Two concerns about PARCC are that we need technology that works, and that the kids are ready to take it. This will drive the systems. Typing is still part of the curriculum and it will be incorporated more.

The MCAS will still be taken by all students, and will be around until the new test starts. It could be 2015, 2016, we don't know yet. PARCC is not just filling in bubbles, there is more than one correct answer.

Q: How do class sizes compare at Day and Bigelow?

A: We are sensitive to the Day/Bigelow size challenge. This year the average class size at Day is 86 and at Bigelow is 81 (though 8th grade is 92). The challenge is not to have unbalanced middle schools. Next year Cabot students will go to Day, though families can apply for out-of-district placements. The current 5th grade is small feeding into Bigelow. There's a waiting issue, because families can move into the district at the last minute. So we don't want overcrowding. But if you're not sure between Day and Bigelow, go ahead and apply.

Q: Can financial literacy and entrepreneurship be part of the curriculum somehow? How to manage an idea. In [a climate of] unemployment, creation is important. Maybe an afterschool club?

David Fleishman: Harvard Business School is just starting something like this now. And there are units on this in big city schools. Not the case so much in suburban school districts. We depend on the parents to do a lot of [financial literacy] at home. We have looked at where to weave that in, but there's no natural place for it. We do have kids working in teams more, and look at how to create projects where kids learn these skills and learn to create more. At NNHS

they do have an elective: Money Matters. Our kids do put together extra-curricular activities. There is stuff out there, like Citizens School in Boston, and lots through non-profits. But not so much in Newton.

Q: How much fundraising for technology is the PTO's responsibility [this year]?

David Fleishman: There has been progress in [school budget] funding middle school tech. There is an equity cap though and we have to figure it out.

Q: What IS the technology being put in place?

David Fleishman: We have the standard tech now for all classrooms. The software piece still needs to happen. Progress is good, training is good. There is some variability still at the high school and even college level on technology use. In some cases it is generational.

Q: Could it be a standard for all teachers to have a website?

Angela Pitter Wright: The tech department is working on tools to help teachers with this, so that they can just post homework very easily, for example. There will be a software that ALL are plugged into, district-wide.

Meeting Adjourned 10 am.