

Vassal Lane Council Meeting Minutes

7 November 2013

Start time 6:08PM

Meeting Notes: Duncan MacArthur

Attending: Sue Vargo, Duncan MacArthur, Heather Kelley, Lissa Galluccio, Natalie Beaumont-Smith, Bob Cowherd, Laura Sylvan, Jamel Adkins-Sharif, Tara Greco, Katie Ehresman .

Agenda:

- 6:00 Welcome, Review agenda, Approve minutes
- 6:05 School Council Elections: Next Steps
- 6:20 Nov. 14 Parent Coffee: Differentiated Instruction
- 6:25 Future Topics for Parent Coffees
- 6:40 Report on School Committee's Innovation Agenda Roundtable Discussion
- 6:55 Standing Items
- 7:00 Public Comment
- 7:05 Plan for next month's meeting

Review of Minutes Issues Raised:

MCAS results sent to families

Incorporating school-wide responses as part of the School Improvement Plan

Professional Development: organized into a three-part cycle. Grade 7 cultural proficiency impact on instructional decisions and impact on learning environment. Grade 6 cycle with Tanya looking at student work in terms of abstract reasoning in writing and speaking towards developing a rubric for use across the core subjects. Shaun and Sarah Coaching Cycle on disciplinary literacy as in "all teachers are teachers of reading and writing." We have a pilot license for Achieve 3000 for supporting literacy in science and social studies in a differentiated instruction approach. Math 180 is a pilot license in conjunction with Reading 180. These are all going well but there we have been slower to roll out is "mindset shift" and "Scholar Identity" based on Dr. Alfred Tatum (Chicago) with particular focus on males of color.

Minutes Approved.

School Council Elections:

Two candidates have stepped forward. The plan is to hold the election as part of the Thursday 21 November Curriculum Night elections on the spot in the auditorium by paper ballot after short statements by candidates. The question was raised of whether or not to expand the membership to 6+6 and recruit a core subject teacher. The idea was floated to offer a non-attending parent representative the opportunity to resign opening up two slots for acclamation at the Curriculum Night election.

Parent Coffees:

The next coffee is 8am Thursday 14 November on the topic of Differentiated Instruction. Our new Inclusion specialist Christina Gavin, Math Coach Shaun Berry, ELA Interventionist Sarah Felino, and Head Jamel Adkins-Sharif will present on the general thinking around Differentiated Instruction. Future Coffee topics could be: Mass.

I. Financial Aid (MIFA) representative, Academic Data, School Improvement Plan, Cultural Proficiency, and an additional coffee on Math Differentiated Instruction. Further topics can be solicited from families via Parent Square/Take Home Tuesday/Vassal Lane Listserv. How about Families First about issues with adolescent engagement. Developmental Design, technology topics like GoogleDocs. It was suggested that the aspiration to make the 14 November Differentiated Instruction discussion about all core subjects, not just math, might have a stronger chance if questions and comments specifically about math could be recorded and made the focus of the following coffee.

School Committee Innovation Agenda Roundtable Outcomes:

In October, the School Committee had a check-in on the Innovation Agenda. It referred back to the Spring 2013 Roundtable Discussion on the Innovation Agenda. The Heads presented their approaches to discipline, lessons learned from the first year and plans for the next. Jamel reported on the shift away from punishment and towards support, several of the issues were from the School Improvement Plan. There are city-wide goals on proficiency in English and Math (as measured by MCAS), habits of scholarship measures, participation in out-of-school time increasing to over 50 percent, school climate survey results. Vassal Lane was the only one of the middle school programs to have developed their own school climate survey.

What about the sense of equity across the middle schools? There was no specific discussion except that the same groupings of students that were struggling prior to the Innovation Agenda continue struggling. Suspensions were higher at other schools than at Vassal Lane despite anecdotal evidence that we were bigger on punishment.

The Innovation Agenda ambition of striking a balance between schools was to correct the inequities of programs and populations across the district in grades 6-8. Prior to this year there was no transfers allowed between upper schools. This year the School Committee voted to allow transfers for students moving into 7th and 8th grades. Four Vassal Lane seventh graders transferred to Ringe Avenue in the past month. There were a significant number of students that shifted to charter schools at the start of the school year. Are there any mechanisms to prevent weakening of the prohibition against transfers? Is there any formal mechanism, for finding out the reasons why some families might be leaving for other schools? Information on why families are motivated to transfer would be useful for the school community to access a sense of what is behind these moves.

Facilities Maintenance

Jim Maloney and Dana Hamm at the District level have engaged in discussions with Tobin Montessori and Tanya Benzin to develop measures to improve maintenance and cleaning in the bathrooms. For example, sanitary receptacles have been installed in the girls rooms though not yet with liners.

Lunch and Recess Timing

A Vassal Lane Monthly (our new school newspaper released 31 October) article includes a story on the short time for lunch, as short as 3 minutes. Tuesdays and Thursdays are particularly challenging as there is an overlap between K-5 and middle school lunch periods. There is some troubleshooting going on. The School Committee passed a 20-minute recess policy further complicating this challenge.

Vassal Lane-Tobin Montessori Shared Space:

This week there was some competition for access to the gymnasium that pointed to the need to forge stronger ties between the two programs sharing the building. Tobin teachers do not know Vassal Lane children. There is a strong push for prevent noisy middle schoolers from disturbing the k-5 program by having them take a longer route in and out of the building but the gym is a different matter. Susan is running a Professional Development session on adolescent development for the Tobin teachers including a chance to get to know the students. Two Tobin teachers are including middle school kids in Book Buddies. Other examples such as community service are similarly mixing the two populations. There was an incident today where one of the 6th graders turned of the lights in the stairwell during a transition time, causing a lot of chaos and disturbed the classes on the second floor. Jamel is pursuing the possibility of changing the light switches to ones that require a key to operate.

Procedural note on the “Standing Items”:

It is important to include time fo accommodate issues as they come up. For example:

Student-Teacher Conferences

The 36 time slots for 100+ eighth graders have proven inadequate and sends the message that we do not expect all families to meet with teachers. This weakens the message at the center of the Partnership School model we are trying to reinforce. Last spring we were presented with a plan to have each Advisory Teacher serve as the point person between each family. To date we do not see evidence of this plan being put into place as some teachers do not seem to have heard of this idea. One advisor meeting with families each trimester seems would do more to connect with students that might otherwise fall through the cracks. To further ease the burden on teachers, these meetings could be more evenly distributed across the 180 days of the school year. Core subject or other teachers could be brought in as the situation warrants.

Ending: 7:40PM