

Communications and Community Relations Subcommittee Report
Thursday, December 15, 2022, at 6:00 p.m.
Broadcast from the Media Arts Studio
454 Broadway, Cambridge, MA

Called for the purpose of discussing the school communications platform, ParentSquare, and to provide an update on the School Council Handbook review process.

Members Present: Member Fantini Co-chair, Member Weinstein, Co-Chair, Member Wilson

Also Present: Vice Chair Rachel, Member Hunterl Michelle Madera, Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education; Dana McLaughlin, Senior Communications Specialist; Raymond Porch, Director of Family and Community Engagement; Steve Smith, Chief Information Officer; Sujata Wycoff, Director of Communications.

Chair Fantini outlined the purpose of the meeting to discuss the communications platform, ParentSquare, as well as to provide an update on the School Council Handbook process.

Chair Fantini began introductions by asking attendees to share their holiday traditions.

Chair Fantini transitioned the meeting to the Cambridge Public Schools (CPS) communications team, Sujata Wycoff and Dana McLaughlin for an overview of ParentSquare, a communications platform launched in August 2022. Before the presentation, Ms. Wycoff introduced Ms. McLaughlin as a new member of her team who came to CPS from local television news. Ms. Wycoff gave an overview of the presentation.

Following the presentation, **Chair Fantini** solicited questions from attendees.

Member Weinstein commented on his positive user experience as both a parent and School Committee member. He inquired about the upcoming user survey and asked if students were included. Ms. Wycoff agreed that students in grades 6-12 (current users) should be included in the survey groups. (The students' interface is entitled StudentSquare.) Ms. Wycoff intends to customize questions to align with segmented user groups which include parents/caregivers, staff, etc. The survey is planned for January /February. **Member Weinstein** commented that CRLS students are currently using Instagram as their preferred mechanism for information sharing and he is hopeful that crossposting with ParentSquare could be viable. Ms. Wycoff agreed. **Member Weinstein** inquired about ParentSquare's availability to volunteer groups associated with CPS. Ms. Wycoff clarified that ParentSquare is currently maintained as a home-to-school/school-to-home communications platform and volunteer/parent groups are not planned as part of the platform. Mr. Smith reiterated this intent as these communications become part of public record and there are legal implications that preclude CPS from allowing outside groups.

The discussion evolved to ParentSquare's future functionality. Ms. Wycoff shared that her team plans to focus on secure document delivery and increasing the percentage of registered users. (Secure document delivery and access to forms are limited to registered users only.) She is committed to getting 100% of families registered and highlighted the platform's robust language translation functionality as a considerable asset. Mr. Smith confirmed that the platform meets accessibility requirements and these details were included as part of the RFP. He will share these details with **Member Weinstein**. In addition, Mr. Smith confirmed that ParentSquare is integrated with Aspen and other communications systems that are utilized by sports teams, after-school programs, etc.

The discussion turned to the early challenges of the platform. Ms. Wycoff shared that ParentSquare is a powerful information-sharing tool, but her team continues to navigate the challenges of monitoring the volume (content and cadence) of communications. She confirmed the effectiveness of electronic newsletters, notably the Superintendent's, and the importance of creating and sharing information in a digestible format. An additional challenge is increasing the percentage of registered families (currently at 65%). Registered users can interact with the platform at the highest levels which include accessing secured documents, notably, report cards. **Members Wilson and Hunter**, as well as other attendees, inquired about Ms. Wycoff's efforts to increase user registrations and showcase ParentSquare's increased capabilities for registered users. Ms. Wycoff shared her concerted efforts in these areas including tutorial videos and FAQs in multiple languages; school visits; attendance at parent events; and forging a partnership with the Office of Community and Family Engagement. In addition, ParentSquare is available by web and phone. The discussion led to the topic of user testing and Ms. Wycoff confirmed that significant user testing was implemented before rollout. Mr. Smith reiterated that new features are tested before they are made available to all users.

Chair Fantini transitioned the meeting's discussion to Mr. Porch and the topic of the School Council Handbook. Mr. Porch shared the following presentation.

At the conclusion of Mr. Porch's presentation, **Member Weinstein** shared that the subcommittee would be meeting again on February 16 to discuss the most current draft version of the School Council Handbook.

Chair Fantini reiterated that the Handbook review process has been iterative with stakeholders keeping top of mind that the Handbook must comply with state regulations. **Members Fantini** and **Weinstein** highlighted that many individuals – parent volunteers to administrators – devoted significant time and energy to the process.

Emie Michaud Weinstock, a CPS parent, shared that a working group of caregivers devoted significant time and energy with Robin Harris, then Director of Family Engagement, in reviewing the document and providing targeted feedback. She shared her disappointment that caregivers' updated language and feedback were not adopted. Volunteers were unaware that their input would be viewed as suggestions. Ms. Weinstock highlighted that increased transparency was needed regarding the outcome and purpose of caregivers' work. In hindsight, she maintained that Maureen MacFarlane, Legal Counsel, or a member of her team, should have participated in the working group's meetings. Ms. Weinstock appreciated that Claire Spinner, Chief Financial Officer, did join their discussion. Ms. Weinstock recommended that a policy should be developed regarding the purpose and outcome of caregiver working groups. She highlighted that caregivers should have a role in developing this policy. Ms. Weinstock stressed her belief that the Handbook should be viewed as an equity document and that CPS should exceed the state's baseline for compliance. She inquired if caregivers would be able to participate in the February 16 subcommittee meeting when the Handbook would be discussed. **Member Weinstein** confirmed that caregivers are encouraged to participate in the February 16 meeting. He is interested in learning more about the working group's process and their updates/changes to the draft handbook. Mr. Porch shared that CPS is committed to supporting schools and their leaders. He highlighted that this moment allowed for an opportunity to learn from missteps and come together to rebuild. **Chair Fantini** commented that the *Cambridge Day* article from December 14 focused on the School Council Handbook contained several inaccuracies. Ms. Wycoff elevated that the handbook was not shared with the current administration, Dr. Greer, until July 2022. Martha Schloming, a CPS parent, but not a member of the Handbook's working group, shared that she was unable to find easily an online version of the document on the CPS website. Once found, it was the 2017 version and did not contain appendices (which were references in the handbook) or list a CPS contact should there be questions. **Member Hunter** thanked Ms. Weinstock and Ms. Scholming for their comments. She was disappointed to learn of the lack of transparency in the review process. She agreed that the CPS website needs improvement and stressed that caregivers need to feel supported.

Chair Fantini shared that Dr. Madera will be working with schools on their School Improvement Plans. Dr. Madera confirmed that she's working with principals to ensure alignment among school councils as well as school improvement planning. She stressed that the driver of school improvement plans should be student data. Dr. Madera reiterated that stakeholders should be working collaboratively and focused on the needs and outcomes of CPS students.

Member Weinstein shared that more communications will be forthcoming regarding the February 16 subcommittee meeting and encouraged working group members to participate. He emphasized that school councils are doing amazing work but there is room for improvement and opportunities for increased collaboration.

Chair Fantini adjourned the meeting at 7:31 pm.