

**Virtual Communications & Community Relations Subcommittee
Thursday, February 16, 2023, at 6:00 p.m.
Broadcast from the Media Arts Studio
454 Broadway, Cambridge, MA 02138**

Called for the purpose to review and discuss the proposed CPSD School Council Handbook and the next steps for supporting school councils.

Subcommittee Members Present: David Weinstein (Co-Chair), Fred Fantini (Co-Chair), Ayesha Wilson

Also Present: Maureen McFarlane, Legal Counsel, Raymond Porch, Director of Family and Community Engagement, Sujata Wycoff, Director of Communications: CPSD; Members of the School Council Handbook Working Group: Pamela Pecchio and Emie Michaud Weinstock

Co-Chair Weinstein began the meeting at 6:01 p.m. by welcoming the group and reading the call of the meeting. He recognized meeting attendees highlighting that CPSD parent, Pamela Pecchio would be joining the meeting at approximately 6:10 p.m. Maureen McFarlane shared that she needed to leave the meeting at 6:30 p.m.

Co-Chair Weinstein shared the agreements of the meeting:

Agreements

- Speak and listen from the heart (respect)
- Step up/step back (watch air time)
- Progressive Stacking approach to conversation
- Expect and accept non-closure (work in progress)
- Bike rack (list of things that are important but should be addressed another time)

Co-Chair Weinstein provided the history and additional context to frame the discussion, highlighting that each school has a school council, but the councils lack uniformity/alignment across the district. He shared a listing of the members of the working group. The Handbook was created to support the school councils to ensure alignment with best practices, always keeping equity, anti-racism, and inclusion at the forefront. Robin Harris, Mr. Porch's predecessor, led a working group that developed the draft handbook that included CPSD parents and caregivers. He acknowledged that communication channels were sometimes weak during this period. **Co-Chair Weinstein** asked Mr. Porch to share his comments. Mr. Porch highlighted that he inherited an earlier version of the Handbook when he arrived at CPSD. He agreed with Co-Chair Weinstein's assessment that channels of communication were missed and that some language of the revised handbook was not shared with Dr. Greer and CPSD leadership. Upon his arrival at CPSD, he was charged with collaborating with Ms. Wycoff and coming back to the subcommittee with the next steps and an offering of ongoing support.

At 6:12 p.m., CPSD parent and member of the School Council Handbook Working Group, Pamela Pecchio, joined the meeting. **Co-Chair Weinstein** asked Ms. Pecchio to share her comments. Ms. Pecchio outlined the process of the working group which came together in spring 2021 and worked through summer 2021. The group was led by Robin Harris with

assistance from Alisa De Los Santos who took meeting notes and ensured that the working group stayed on task. The CPSD caregivers came together with an initial goal of determining how each school was handling its school council with a subsequent charge to collaborate and draft the School Council Handbook. The working group consisted of approximately 15 caregivers. Meetings were held bi-weekly and members worked and collaborated between meetings which was a time-consuming process. In drafting the Handbook, the group carefully ensured that the text was compliant with the law and elevated equity and accessibility. In addition, the group wanted to ensure that the Handbook outlined resources with the ultimate goal of providing forms and templates.

Co-Chair Weinstein thanked Ms. Pecchio and the members of the working group for their time, effort, and dedication. He turned the floor over to Ms. McFarlane and Mrs. Porch for comments. Ms. McFarlane noted that changes needed to be made to the Handbook to be compliant with the law. She highlighted that the School Committee has a separate policy regarding school councils and complying with the open meeting law. She wants to ensure these policies are in alignment.

Mr. Porch gave an overview of the following [presentation](#) which outlined, in detail, the revisions that were made to the Handbook's draft. Ms. Wycoff reiterated that the current moment provided an opportunity to recalibrate and reset. During the presentation, Mr. Porch paused for questions. **Co-Chair Fantini** highlighted that the School Improvement Plans (SIPs) are approved by the Superintendent, but the School Committee should maintain its role as part of the review process. He shared that the school budget does include a discretionary portion and he wonders if school councils may have some involvement in decision-making regarding these funds. **Co-Chair Weinstein** echoed Member Fantini's assessment that the School Committee should continue to be a part of the SIP review process to ensure that the School Committee is informed and can provide feedback. Ms. Pecchio asked about the advisory role of the school councils and how councils function as vote-taking entities. Mr. Porch responded that it is important for the training and implementation of school councils to align with individual schools and their leaders.

Co-Chair Weinstein shared the page with the referred edits. He shared that the documents were posted to the meeting portal and encouraged Ms. Pecchio and others to review the documents. In addition, he offered to respond to questions via email. **Co-Chair Weinstein** appreciated Mr. Porch's comments and his intention. He echoed that the review was an iterative process and additional revisions could be considered. Mr. Porch continued the presentation and highlighted that appendices were added to the handbook to help ensure its clear implementation. Mr. Porch shared that reviewing and updating the document was a learning experience and collaborating with Ms. Wycoff was a highlight. He underscored that to ensure success, logistical details need to be done well. Mr. Porch and Ms. Wycoff commended the strong efforts of the working group. Both Mr. Porch and Ms. Wycoff are enthusiastic about the handbook's implementation and training aspect once the handbook is approved. **Co-Chair Weinstein** opened the discussion to questions and comments. **Co-Chair Fantini** applauded the efforts of the working group. He shared that the MA Association of School Committees was so impressed by the handbook and inquired about CPSD doing a presentation. He highlighted the need for consistency throughout the district and the potential need to support schools with logistical details – meeting minutes, etc. He echoed that the School Committee manual and

School Council Handbook need to be alignment. He believes that the Handbook should be reviewed annually. When councils are functionally well, they can be very effective. In addition, he applauded the work of members Weinstein and Wilson for their dedication to the review process. **Co-Chair Weinstein** agreed that the working group's efforts provided a great foundation. He recommended that similar future efforts involve all stakeholders and that improved clarity should be a priority, underscoring that working group members were not made aware of the outcome of their efforts. He believes that the subcommittee can serve as a forum to ensure that stakeholders on in alignment. Ms. Pecchio appreciated his comments and echoed his sentiments. **Co-Chair Weinstein** encouraged her continued involvement and those of her working group peers. **Member Wilson** agreed with the importance of transparency. She shared that annual check-ins would be helpful to ensure that school councils are successfully onboarded.

Co-Chair Weinstein turned the meeting over to Mr. Porch and Ms. Wycoff to outline the next steps. Ms. Wycoff shared that the current draft of the handbook will be updated with Ms. McFarlane's revisions to ensure legal compliance. The draft will then be forwarded to the subcommittee for review (outside of a meeting) before the School Committee is presented with the document. Ms. Wycoff highlighted that Dr. Greer will be involved in the process to ensure that all stakeholders are in alignment. **Co-chair Weinstein** agreed with Ms. Wycoff's approach.

Co-Chair Weinstein transitioned the conversation to ways in which school councils could be supported. He highlighted the logistical challenges of implementing and managing school councils including such tasks as meeting minutes, website platform, and ensuring accessibility. Referencing his involvement in the Graham & Parks School Council, he shared that the Cambridge Schoolwide Advisory Group (CSAG) met monthly and was established as part of CPSD's Innovation Agenda. At least one representative from each school council joined the meetings and reported back to individual schools. He shared that this process was valuable in making connections and sharing best practices. He recommends that this process be reestablished (now with a remote option) and could be especially helpful in onboarding new members. He encouraged including School Committee members in this process and noted that oftentimes members, especially those with school-age children, attend school council meetings. He believes that strengthening these connections and establishing points of contact are important.

Co-Chair Fantini highlighted that the handbook notes that PTOs are in charge of school council elections which may come as a surprise to them as it is a significant undertaking. Regarding training, he encouraged videos featuring well-run school councils for sharing best practices. He suggested that elementary school councils could serve as a feeder system to the upper schools. He shared his concern that given the high level of detail in the document, schools and principals may be challenged with its implementation at the onset.

Mr. Porch echoed Co-Chair Fantini's remarks regarding training and ensuring accessibility. He believes the annual review process will be critical in recognizing what's working and not working and ensuring the school councils are in alignment with the district's goals. **Co-Chair Weinstein** agreed with Co-Chair Fantini's assessment that some principals may be tasked with more work than others in the implementation phase, but he is hopeful that there will be less work in the long run. He underscored that some school councils could serve as state models while others need more support or are in a state of transition.

Co-Chair Weinstein recapped the next steps that Ms. Wycoff outlined earlier in the meeting. Regarding the next steps for the subcommittee, **Co-Chair Weinstein** highlighted the following: 1.) review the School Committee policy and ensure it's aligned with the handbook. If needed, revisions should be made; 2.) review the Handbook's final draft; 3.) present the document to the School Committee in an upcoming Committee meeting.

Co-chair Weinstein asked when Ms. Wycoff and Mr. Porch could come back to the subcommittee with Ms. MacFarlane's revisions. Ms. Wycoff shared that MA courts would be reviewing the open meeting law in March which refers to requirements that were implemented due to COVID. Ms. Wycoff will circle back to Dr. Greer. **Co-Chair Weinstein** highlighted that potential changes in the law should not hinder their continued next steps and that revisions could be made following the MA court decision. The goal is for the Handbook to be completed in May.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:15 pm.