MLK School Council Meeting

January 11, 2022

Present: Gerald Yung (principal, co-chair), William Moss (co-chair), Piotr Mitros (secretary), Robin Chen (Rep), Jason Homy (Rep), Robin Harris (Principal on Assignment for Family Engagement), Ada Franchino, Sandrine Hulot, Shruti Rastogi, AGB

**The meeting proceeded without a quorum. This means that there was an open discussion, but no decisions were made and no votes were taken. Most of the teachers were out due to COVID-related staffing shortages.**

William asked whether we should meet without quorum.

Jason asked about whether we should apply Open Meeting Laws, since they seem cumbersome. It doesn’t feel like School Council members are public citizens, but rather parent volunteers who care about the school. He didn’t feel it was a body comparable to the school committee.

William gave pointers to state web sites, which say we do need to abide by rules and regulations.

Robin Harris joined and William asked her about Open Meeting Rules, and meeting without quorum?

Robin responded that we could have a conversation, but that the body cannot take votes, make decisions, or anything of that nature.

At Wil’s urging, Jason repeated his question. Jason felt very restricted in what he does since he doesn’t want to break the rules. He raised concerns about not being sure what felt like deliberation outside of the body, and wanted to have side conversations about things like Robin Chen’s work on water fountains or community bulletin boards outside of formal meetings.

Robin Harris agreed with Jason that the rules could be cumbersome; councils should come together to improve life for our kids and our community. Some councils followed the rules, and some did not. On the whole, it’s good to be in compliance, but Cambridge is sometimes in compliance and sometimes outside.

William agreed that it can be stifling, but emphasized that we should follow the law.

Piotr brought in the history; the MLK school council was outside of both the letter and the spirit of the law until recently. School councils either ought to follow the spirit of the law (be effective venues for site-based decision-making), or if not, at least the letter of the law.

Robin Chen brought in how school councils feed into school committees, as a lot of school council members often become school committee members, and how they form part of our municipal democratic body more broadly. In addition, to Jason’s point comparing the school council to the school committee, she pointed out how our school committee is a little bit unique in that it’s highly paid. In most cities, school committees are either unpaid volunteer positions or only nominally paid, just like the school council.

William Moss raised that the original goal of the meeting was the SIP process. The last meeting broke down, and he asked Robin Harris to outline the SIP process.

Robin Harris said that she would defer to Dr. Masera, who could answer those questions. Unfortunately, there was a fire at C-Port, and she is currently busy there. Robin Harris asked if we could defer the SIP discussion by a month, and asked whetherthere other things to discuss.

William Moss had expected that the SIP would take up a lot of time. The only other topic was an audit of policies. That would also need Dr. Madera’s input. William mentioned that Jason had topics, and deferred to Gerald.

Gerald asked if we had questions about the SIP. The SIP was a broad process with teachers, and was well-received by the teachers. COVID is the elephant in the room, where teachers are overwhelmed, skipping lunch, and trying to keep mental balance, SEL, and academics in balance.

William read the state requirements on the SIP, and the (lack of) alignment of the current document to the state requirements.

Jason asked if state guidance was current. Piotr and William clarified that it was.

Public comment:

Piotr raised the issue that in the past few years, no African American students exceeded expectations on the MCAS, and advanced learners from other demographics felt neglected. The SIP focuses on students two levels behind, and feels deficit-based. How do we move to an assets-based mindset, and get kids from all groups ahead, and then work to keep them ahead of standards, so we’re not on a constant treadmill?

Any Other Business:

Robin Chen asked about students who go to the nurse being sent home with e.g. headaches or other mild ailments. If that’s the policy, students should know that’s the outcome.

William said that policy lets people know where they stand. He raised a prior discussion on screentime policy, where the conclusion was that screentime comes down to the individual teacher.

Gerald responded that screens are used on a daily basis. We have morning announcements through video. He used to send emails asking families to reduce screentime, but that changed in the pandemic. In pandemic, we had to train K-2 teachers on how to use screens, where before, it was really only in 3-5 where digital technology seemed natural. Now, it’s up to the teachers.

Jason, given his medical background, commented that the nurse should have the right to make a medical opinion. Perhaps this shouldn’t be policy-driven but medical-decision driven.

Gerald complimented Nurse Rollins. She works harder than anyone. She understands the impact on families of sending kids home. Robin Harris mentioned that nurses at other schools are out with COVID.

Sandrine thanked Gerald. She asked a question clarifying about how people are informed if there is a case in a class.

Gerald responded that each case triggers three levels of emails + phone calls:

* Everyone in the school gets an email.
* Everyone in the classroom receives an email.
* Close contacts, vaccinated or not, will get a phone call and an email.

The whole class is *not* considered a close contact, but the school looks at who was likely in close proximity to the student. This involves looking at the classroom, lunch, afterschool, bus, etc. There’s a lot of detective work.

Sandrine commented that it seems hard to discriminate who spent 15 minutes with whom.

Gerald added that the weekly pool testing percentage is high, and described the test-and-stay program.

Piotr asked about flexibility with students being out during spikes. Where do we trigger AVF policy? Are there high-stakes consequences to keeping kids home?

Gerald said that the state has draconian policies from DESE which it needs to follow:

* The school can’t excuse absences due to worries of catching COVID. Students are expected to be in school.
* The state has taken remote learning off of the table. Remote learning doesn’t count as learning.

MLK normally has very high attendance. However, it had 90, then 60, students out. While the school can’t excuse absences, it will not call DCF or trigger high-stakes consequences if parents communicate with the school. For a DCF call, the school would need to consider the child to be in danger. For kids keeping kids home, while kids won’t formally be marked as excused, the school also won’t call DCF.

William expressed concern that more communication about where policies come from might be helpful, since otherwise, the Principal might take flack for policies he didn’t create or was responsible for.

Shruti asked about expedited ways of getting kids back in school. Right now, kids need a negative PCR test after an extended absence. However, PCR testing availability is poor. Is there a way to get kids back to school without this?

Gerald said that this would be outside of the school’s authority; that requirement comes from the district.