

Minutes for NSHS SC Meeting

April 12, 2011

Attending

Joel Stenbridge (Principal), Barry Wanger (Co-chair)
Ryan Augusta, Deena David, Chip DiMarco (minutes), Lucia Dolan, Prevenya Harris, Tom Lee,
Debbie Linder, Marcia Okun, Jeanne O'Reilly, Lisa Rucinski, Janet Wertheimer, Eleanor Wood
Joe Scozzaro (visitor)

Public Comment

Marcia Okun expressed concern that the budget cuts will increase stress and affect the mental health of students and staff. She asked that we try to reduce these negative effects.

Principal's Update

Joel began with the good news, which includes the performance of academic teams, like the math and science and speech teams, and the Ligerbot robotics team, which did well at the recent first robotics competition.

Details on the budget and discussion

Joel then reported on the status of the budget discussions -- bad news with respect to cuts for the whole system and to NSHS in particular. He characterized South as an excellent school "on the precipice" of becoming something less because of the cuts. He emphasized that the cuts will place a burden on the backs of teachers.

Honors courses will likely grow to 30 students, though Joel thinks the kids who "do school well" will manage in those conditions. However, he said the kids who struggle will have the most difficulty with the changes. And the programs to which struggling students respond best, like SAM and Global and Physics/Tech, are likely to be next in line for cuts.

Joel also described the plans to cut courses in World Languages. We discussed exactly how this would work -- for instance, if we cannot fund introductory courses in several languages, students who started a language in Middle School would not have the option to change to another language. Asked whether cuts to World Languages would likely continue in future years, Joel answered that he expected that to be the case.

Joel reported how cost control was also part of the city's budget discussion, especially in the hope of lowering the cost of heating buildings, insuring the staff's health care, and maintaining buildings.

Asked whether there was any resistance to the proposal to raise fees on activities like theater, Joel reported that all the proposed fees were accepted, so parents should expect all of those activities to cost more.

On the subject of teachers' workload: Marica and Deb both pointed out how the workload will remain the same but spread over more kids. Inevitably, that means more struggling kids.

Traffic Safety Report

Barry reports that he is waiting for the city's parking report. The parking ban on a section of Brandeis Road and the reduction of rates in the parking lot should help congestion around the school. At Deena's request, Barry will ask the city again about getting better lighting in the parking lots at night.

School Improvement Plan

Joel briefed the council on the new initiative called “the Signal,” a way of using the current attendance system in SMS to enable teachers to identify students who might be struggling in a range of ways. The idea is to make systematic the sharing of info that already goes on informally, to try to catch kids earlier when they are having problems and to more quickly get them the appropriate support. It includes feedback loops to ask, “Is this working?” The kinds of things teachers will look for include changes in behavior and attitude; a change in whether homework is getting done; and changes in grades.

Responding to Barry’s question, Joel said this project shouldn’t require extra resources, but rather a better use of resources already in place.

Lucia asks about how parents are brought into this process, which began a discussion of how the current parent-teacher communications work; how teachers try to balance the need to look for struggling students against the effort to encourage achieving students with positive reinforcement; and how to raise this Signal without making a student feel nervous that he or she is in trouble or has done something wrong. The use of the word “signal,” rather than something more aggressive, like “trigger,” was intended to try to take some of the negative pressure off the students identified by it. Responding to Deena’s question about transparency in this process, Joel made clear that having students and parents on board and informed and involved.

After Joel briefly described the updates to the section devoted to closing achievement gaps, several people had comments and questions. Tom recalled last year’s Data Team presentation, which quantified the kinds of gaps the SIP will address. We talked about “the tails” on the achievement graphs -- where we can see the students who are struggling to keep up with their peers academically -- and “moving the mountain,” which is a way of saying that closing achievement gaps should be about improving everyone’s academic success while helping struggling students to catch up.

Stress & Resilience Committee Update

Chip and Ryan reported some progress on a short-form survey of student attitudes towards stress and their school work habits. They have a draft they will soon test, and they hope to pilot a survey before the next meeting.

New Business

Barry will arrange with PTSO elections for next year’s School Council: we have two parent seats opening up -- Mona’s and Barry’s.

Submitted by Chip DiMarco