

April 6, 2010 -- Newton South School Council Minutes

Members Present: Joel Stembridge, Bob Parlin, Debbie Linder, Ariel Kaluzhny, Eleanor Wood, Prevenya Harris, Ryan Auguste, Marcia Okun, Tom Lee, Lisa Rucinski, Deena David, Barry Wanger, Sue Kirshenbaum, Chip DiMarco, Marci Sapers, Mona Hochberg.

Principal's Update: Joel Stembridge remarked what an event filled month it had been since the last meeting: Passing Time (25 minutes where the whole student body passed through the hall while musical performances took place throughout the school); Tertulia (performing arts festival); Faculty Talent Show and the teacher/parent potluck dinner.

School Improvement Plan Update: Stembridge said that the goal was to have a draft by the May School Council meeting and then finalized in June. He said this was a very busy time in the school but the four SIP subcommittees – In-School Support; After-School Support; Best Faculty Practices; and African-American Achievement Program – were committed to staying on schedules.

Budget: The School Committee passed the budget on April 5. This was the same budget as reviewed in the Council's March meeting. However, the District is still waiting on state funds. If this money does not come through, 3.5 FTEs will need to be cut. This will happen in small amounts over several departments. Faculty will not be laid off and classes won't be canceled unless very low enrollment. The reorganization of the main office still needs to be determined and will result in budget savings as will small changes in the library.

Registration results have been sent to department chairs and Stembridge has met with each to determine class and faculty details. If classes have to be cut due to low enrollment or budget issues, students will learn this over the summer and they will be assigned to their second choice class. The school is well ahead in the registration process than in previous years due to the implementation of new software, SMS (although there are still some kinks in the system). Marcia Okrun said that it is easier on teachers if they know before the summer exactly which classes they will be teaching.

Canceled Classes for Sophomores: If parents and housemasters have agreed that a sophomore can have free block instead of study hall, then this student can now have a free block if a class is canceled. The computer system will print out a list of all sophomores who are not allowed free blocks and whose classes are canceled. These students (about 20% of the class) will be expected to report to study hall and there will be progressive discipline if they do not.

Elle Wood asked if sophomores taking junior classes would still be targeted for study hall and Stembridge said yes.

Bob Parlin said this came about as a policy of South Senate, as it creates a more consistent policy. Marcia Okun pointed out that a parent could change their mind regarding restricting their child from free block.

Installation of Security Cameras: Joel Stembridge and Jennifer Price, principal at North, are sending a request to Superintendent Marini that security cameras be installed in both schools. The goal is to decrease crimes of opportunity, mainly theft and false fire alarms. Stembridge pointed out that his Boston HS, which had cameras, only had one false alarm in five years, while South had three this year alone. While having the school be a community where teachers know students well can be a deterrent,

the cameras are necessary for lowering the rate of theft and false alarms.

Stembridge acknowledges that there will be opposition to this on privacy grounds, but that safety was more important. The City of Newton has cameras all over the city and as a public school, cameras here would not be unreasonable. The students will clearly be told that no one will be watching them through the tapes nor will the tapes be regularly reviewed. It is only if an incident occurs – fire alarm, theft or another type of circumstance – that the tape would then be watched. Also, there will not be cameras in bathrooms or locker rooms. The level of theft is unacceptable and Stembridge said that simply telling kids to stop is not working. Stembridge will go to the South Senate and the Faculty Council to explain the plan.

Members mentioned several ways in which the false alarms caused problems in addition to disrupting class — such as the cost of the responding firetrucks; and disturbing the young children in day care. Graffiti was also mentioned as a problem that could be decreased by the cameras.

Debbie Linder is in favor the plan and pointed out the day care issue.

Sue Kirshenbaum is in favor. She pointed out that South has many unopened doors and visitors could enter freely. The cameras (some of which would be put at the entrances) would provide security. In order to get the freedom, we needed to balance it with the cameras. (Stembridge pointed out that most high schools had only one door open and a staffperson sitting there to welcome visitors.)

Chip DiMarco said he needed further convincing and wondered if we could use fake cameras. (Stembridge said no.)

Eleanor Richard is in favor although her former high school had cameras and still had thefts. She raised the question of whether not having cameras could be a liability issue?

Barry Wanger questioned whether it would really work given the number of fire alarms. Stembridge said it would at least allow them to see who is in the school if an incident happens and though careful planning could result in crimes, it should reduce the spontaneous ones.

Deena David said that when she was PTSO President, parents often complained to her about the level of theft at the school. Students and former students have been known to enter the building at night. In the past, opponents of cameras felt they would target minority and special needs students. She also pointed out that in the aftermath of Sept, 11, parents wanted cameras in the school for security.

Lisa Rucinski felt the cameras should go in so the administration would not have to spend time on these issues and could focus on education.

Tom Lee said that if businesses have security cameras and passes for people to enter, a school should not be doing less.

Marcia Okun is in favor as the thieves are caught very infrequently, kids get groped in the hallways and passing time is uncomfortable for many students.

Ryan Augusta said that teachers used to have “duty” in the hallways but this is no longer allowable due to union negotiations.

Elle Wood said that after the first false alarm, Stembridge spoke to the students at length about all the negative consequences and she felt this education should continue. She also said that it was scary to think of cameras always recording what is going on in hallways.

Others wondered if 1800 students needed more education when it was only a handful of students committing the acts.

Bob Parlin said in the past he has been opposed to cameras in the school but now he supports it. It is a public school with public hallways and nothing inappropriate should be going on.

Mona Hochberg is in favor and suggested that the Fire and Police departments be active partners in explaining why we need the cameras.

The next step is for Stembridge and Price to submit a request to Marini and then Marini would send it to the school committee.

Naming of the Field House: The school wants to have the field house named in honor of Bob Chrusz, former director of physical education. Bob Parlin, Ryan Auguste and Barry Wanger agreed to join the Committee making this request.

- Submitted by Mona Hochberg