

Firrhill High School - Parent Council Meeting

School Library, 2 October 2023, 7:00pm

Minutes

Abbreviations:

- AC - Acting Chair
- ASN - Assisted Support Needs
- CEC – City of Edinburgh Council
- CL – Curriculum Leader
- Cllr – Councillor
- PC – Parent Council
- PSA - Pupil Support Assistant
- PTA - Parent Teachers Association aka Fundraising
- SLT – Senior Leadership Team
- SQA – Scottish Qualifications Authority

Present:

Stuart Barlow (Acting Chair), Crerar Christie (Secretary), Jenny Orr (Treasurer), Mr Hamilton (Headteacher), Nicola Dow, Martin Newcombe, Aleksandra Brauner, Kirsten Hale, Karen McShane, Karen Bouissou, Alex Murray, Olayinka Sodiya, Sarwar Mohammed, Helene O'Sullivan, Nichola Dobson, and 6 other parents and carers.

1 Welcome and Apologies:

The Acting Chair started the meeting by welcoming all those in attendance, followed by a round of introductions.

There were apologies from Mr Isdale and Cllr Arthur.

2 Approval of minutes

The minutes of the previous meeting on Monday 15th May 2023 were approved.

3 Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

4 Chair's report

The Chair indicated that, with the resignation before the summer of Tim Wallace, there was nothing to report under this item, other than an ongoing push for recruitment to the PC, and particularly it's sub-groups.

5 Treasurer's report

The Treasurer indicated that the PC bank account balance stood at £4,206.

6 Headteacher's report

6.1 Staffing update

The Head reported that the school was fully staffed, noting that this happy state was not necessarily the position in most schools across the Edinburgh estate.

The Head noted that recruiting pupil support assistants (PSAs) was problematic, and especially so given the retirement of Mrs Wiseman, a popular and effective PSA. The school is currently three PSAs short of it's complement of six.

The Head gave an overview of the recruitment process for PSAs, including the associated issues and problems. The head noted that CEC was undertaking a review of the PSA recruitment process, and that this - with its freezing of recruitment – was not helpful to Firrhill filling its vacancies. The Head noted that this problem was likely to affect all schools in the Edinburgh area, with every school being short at least one PSA.

The Head indicated that the school was also having difficulty recruiting a D&T technician.

6.2 Financial Position

The Head reported that the School was in a good financial position. The Head noted this was due to carefully money management and efficient timetabling. Other factors include: high teacher attendance rates - which lowers the requirement for supply teachers, and the school's ability to attract good pupils. The Head noted the school roll was higher than CEC anticipated this year, at 1,331, which brings additional funding to the school.

The Head indicated that reductions and budget savings were likely on their way. While the extent of these is unknown, the Head indicated that the school was in a good position to manage these. The Head gave the example of CEC's review of the Education Welfare Service, which was near completion, indicating that big changes, including dissolution, to that service were likely.

6.3 SQA

The Head indicated that an early review of the results looked promising. A fuller review of the results will be given in the November PC meeting after some statistical analysis of the results has been undertaken. There was a bit of a dip in S6 numbers achieving 5 Highers (S5 and S6 results are aggregated) as the Covid bump feeds its way through the year groups. The Head noted strong performance in S5, and a step up in S4 Nat 5 performance.

Given the change in the appeal process, the Head noted that the anticipated surge in the number of appeals did not emerge. Last year there were 183 appeals, this year there were 90, most of which were from young people with no award, followed by those who achieved a B and were looking to get it uplifted to an A. There were no priority appeals, and there were very few non-attending pupils.

6.4 Summer works

There was not much work done during the summer; mostly painting in the Science Labs and Social Subject's rooms. There was some re-flooring done, with plans for more extensive flooring of the Science Labs and Science corridor.

6.5 Issues arising and parent's questions

6.5.1 PSAs

A parent asked the Head if CEC knew the rate of pay for PSAs was less than in adjacent councils. The Head indicated that he didn't know, but suspected they did, and that other Councils may place additional responsibilities on their PSAs for the extra remuneration.

The Head was asked if he knew how long the freeze in PSA recruitment was likely to continue. The Head indicated it would likely be around 2 – 3 months before a decision was made once this window had closed. The Head also noted it was a problem most Heads were grappling with.

A parent noted that part of the problem may be that people applied for PSA positions with an expectation they'd be placed at their nominated school, but were then placed in a different school, and even in a different sector of education. The Head indicated that CEC's central administration of the process wasn't working as well as it could, particularly in relation to candidate placement preference.

A parent noted that, from a PC point of view, applying for a PSA position might be seen as a good return-to-work route for parents. The Head indicated that there was no harm in the PC raising it as an opportunity for parents. The Head indicated there was no prerequisite training or certification (other than the regular PVG checks) required for a PSA role, and that any good school would give the PSA the training they required. The Head noted that at Firrhill, this includes the PSA's closely following the teacher's training and accessing the same knowledge base.

A parent indicated they would be willing to write a PSA recruitment communication for parents. The Head noted the AC might also like to raise it as an issue for the neighbourhood locality meetings.

6.5.2 Additional Support Needs (ASN) Mainstream, Group

Two parents asked if there was any interest in setting up an ASN support group at Firrhill, particularly in terms of representing Firrhill in the Edinburgh ASN locality group. They noted that Firrhill appeared to be unrepresented at these meetings.

It was suggested that the PC establish an ASN sub-group, the role of which would initially be to represent Firrhill at Edinburgh ASN locality groups, and this was approved by the PC.

6.5.3 Question on SQA review

A parent asked about SQA changes. The Head indicated that - what is known as - the Hayward review and its proposals are so far a matter of internal educational debate, with no clear policy for any assessment model changes, or even any conclusion as to what model or implementation of reform would be more effective or practicable. The Head noted that even if a parent's child was in S1, it is unlikely that any such reform would affect their child, and that the lead time for any decisions – once made – to be implemented would be four years.

6.5.4 School Building Management

A parent asked if the school was responsible for repairs, particularly with respect to the girl's toilets. The Head indicated that the school was part of a service level agreement with Amey; maintenance and upkeep would be an Amey responsibility, repair for damage that was not wear-and-tear would be the school's responsibility.

The Head indicated the service-level agreement that included Firrhill was between CEC and Amey, and that the school has no sight of the contract.

Several parents indicated that there was a general issue with school toilets and pupils feeling unwilling to use them. The Head indicated that the toilets were cleaned at least once a day, in the morning, and that any additional cleaning would require a change to the service level agreement.

7 Working groups update

7.1 Business and Enterprise group

There was no recent activity to report. The involvement of the parents who ran this subgroup has diminished as their children have left the school, and activity has dwindled.

Two parents indicated that they had tried to contact the PC to volunteer for this subgroup, but that they had received no response. The PC committee were apologetic, and concerned, at the breakdown in communication. The PC committee understood it to be an oversight in the hand-over of access details to the PC email account following the previous Chair's resignation. The AC took an action to get the access details from the previous Chair.

The PC welcomed the offer these parents to take on the activity of this group.

There was a discussion on the importance of establishing partnerships between schools and business, and the value of businesses engaging early with education. Examples of successful interactions included initiatives at Forrester's and Craigmount, and at Firrhill with businesses such as Baillie Gifford getting involved.

7.2 Health and Well-being

The PC Treasurer noted a couple of activities were carried out by Morag Carmichael (PE dept) for parents whose children were struggling with exams. The Head noted that Polly Nielson (PE dept) mostly lead this initiative, and that Morag was more involved with raising teams with confidence.

There was also a mental health support event last year, with which Morag and S6 were also involved.

It was noted that there are a few members in the group, but there wasn't a specific Chair for this group. There was an action to contact Margaret Douglas, and possibly Morag, to determine the best way forward for this group.

7.3 Fundraising and Social Group

Louise Wilson gave a brief update of recent activities of the group.

The recent Quiz night was not quite as successful as previously. It was thought the main reason was because Scotland Rugby team were playing that night. It also raised questions about promoting the event and communications in general. A side benefit of the small turn out was that those attending were able to essentially run small informal focus groups on how to make improvements.

Last year's disco night was cancelled due to lack of interest, however, there was an uplift in donations received when the notice of cancellation was issued together with a call for donations.

The group has polled parents for other potential fund-raising events, but there wasn't a large response.

The Christmas raffle will be run again this year, with calls for items to raffle to be sent out soon, followed by calls for bids.

The group also acknowledged that, in the current cost-of-living crises, any approach to parents for donations needed to be sensitive to the prevailing economic conditions.

The AC noted that the school "wish list" of funding requests probably needs to be reviewed for this year, and that this would provide a clearer idea of priorities and targets for the group.

The AC also noted that, in terms of getting communications out to parents, Parent Council activities were well served by the school's current business manager, who was very good at getting communications out to parents.

7.3.1 Discussion about Communications

A discussion on the nature of communications developed. Issues that were raised included:

- The nature of the messages, e.g.: Key information - reminders, diary dates, etc., Calls for support or involvement, etc.

- The perceived importance of the message,

- The method of communication, e.g.: email, static web sites, Instagram, Twitter/ X, Signal, or a (name unknown) school app for parents.

The Head noted that the SLT have looked into, and continue to consider, the issue of communications, specifically external communications.

A parent asked about reaching out through Business and Enterprise to parents who could assist in, e.g., website development. The Head pointed out that there were several issues to consider, noting that web sites are only relevant if they are regularly maintained, and that there was no budget to contract a business to provide this service. In terms of parent volunteers: again, update on demand would be an unrealistic expectation of a volunteer, sustainability would be an issue as

parent's children pass through the school, and there is perhaps even a risk, i.e., if the parent ever had a grievance with the school, they may choose to use the website as a vehicle to air it.

The Head noted that the Parent Council has its own page within the school website, which parents can maintain.

The Head noted the school was looking at viable means for parents receiving timely access to information relevant to each year group.

The meeting felt the matter required further discussion, and that this matter will be returned to at a later date.

8 Sean Broadfoot award

The Secretary offered an initial wording for an award, to be awarded to pupils in the name of Mr Broadfoot;

"Sean Broadfoot award for the individual who, though not necessarily otherwise recognised, is deemed to have improved themselves and/or inspired and encouraged others towards success through good humour, perseverance and/or force of personality in a sporting/ scholastic endeavour."

Mr Hamilton indicated that some differentiation was required between the awards the school already presented and the proposed award. The key questions revolve around: the basis for the award, which year group should be considered, and, how a nominee would be selected. The Head indicated that most awards were Year 6 awards, and there was a view in the meeting that either a whole school or year 4 award may be appropriate.

The Head indicated he'd mentioned it to the Pupil Council, but that it was too soon for them to have canvassed any thoughts from the year councils, or suggested any possible options for such an award.

The Head also indicated that he had mooted to the school the idea of a Firrhill/ Beeslack rotating joint sporting event, the winner of which would be awarded the Mr Broadfoot trophy (or similar), which would be a pupil-participatory award, rather than a personal award.

9 Date of next meeting.

The proposed dates for this year's PC meetings are:

27/11/23

26/02/24

13/05/24

10 Any Other Competent Business

The Parent Council would like to extend its sincere thanks to outgoing members who have given so constructively of their time and talents.

The Parent Council would particularly like to extend its grateful thanks to Tim Wallace for all his efforts on behalf of, and contributions to, the effective, sustained, and smooth running of the Parent

Council, and not least for his time as Chair of the PC during the period of national, Covid related, lockdown.

The PC would also like to sincerely thank Cheryl Wallace for so ably carrying out the duties of treasurer of the Fundraising and Social group.