

Minutes of the Parent Council Meeting

16 November 2016

- Present: Clare Whyles (CW) (representing Susie Bagnall), Simon Bridget-Jones (SBJ), Ben Haydon (BH), Reza Akhavan (RA), Lena Bull (LB), Paola Ferrari (PF), Sarah Hassenpflug (SH), Michelle Thompson (MT), Alanna Topham-Locke (ATL), John West (JW)
- Apologies: Suzanna Carter Francis
- Minutes: Lena Bull

1) SBJ on behalf of the Governors raised the issue of the school's extremely tight budget this year, a combination of the government not having raised funding this year and the school not yet being fully subscribed following expansion. This has specifically become an issue with regard to "non-basic" expenses such as swimming lessons, day trips or a teachers' coffee machine, as the school has no spare funds to meet deficits in this area and SESA funds are not always an appropriate (nor inexhaustible) source.

Raising parents' awareness of the very tight school budget will be important to ensure nobody who is able to pay their contribution towards school trips fails to do so. Various options were discussed:

- More vocal communication of the importance of paying, for example by way of a fundraising column in the class room, effective email communication via ParentMail and careful wording in newsletters. Care must be taken not to "name and shame" individual parents or children.
- Offering parents the option to pay an additional contribution to cover the shortfall from families who are unable to pay.
- Offering families who struggle to pay the option to pay a proportion (rather than none at all).
- Charging x% "tax" on all payments to go towards a contingency fund.
- Individual fundraising activity in the classroom, getting the children engaged and involved.

Some SESA funds could be used for expenses directly related to children's experience (such as swimming). The possibility of using SESA funds to pay a professional fundraiser to maximise fundraising potential was mentioned.

ACTION:

- CW to investigate possibility of allowing partial and additional payments on ParentMail

2) There was positive feedback from parents regarding the provision of French lessons at school, the atmosphere, quality and inclusive nature of the school orchestra event, the school's focus on behaviour and rewarding children for being kind and considerate, and Miss Pullin's teaching excellence.

3) SH as Danube class representative raised an issue with regard to the perceived rigidity of the library policy, which is felt to be discouraging children from engaging with the library. CW clarified that high expectations do apply but the rules are made very clear and incentive schemes are in place to encourage children to return books on time. The school feels that the library is an important means of encouraging responsibility and appreciation of resources in the children. Amanda Robson is aware of the issue, which may be class-specific, and will bear it in mind.

ACTION: CW and Amanda Robson have met with the particular class where the most concern was expressed to reassure the children.

4) SH as Danube class representative raised the issue of dogs near the school gates, which frighten some children. This was previously discussed and is felt to be in hand. The issue has been raised in the newsletter; parents are asked not to tie dogs to the fence close to the gate and parents have been informed of the possibility of sessions with Amanda Robson's therapy dog for children who have a fear of dogs. Mrs Bagnall is at the gate in the mornings and addresses the issue as needed.

5) Homework and maths: A number of parents in KS2 questioned whether children are challenged enough in maths, and the related subject of homework, which is felt to be repetitive. A range of (positive and negative) opinions on project homework and parent involvement were expressed in Year 3.

CW clarified the school's policy as follows:

- The school's aim is to do the best by the children while acknowledging that it will not be able to accommodate every family's expectations with regard to homework, as these range widely. Compared within the other thirteen primary schools in the Cherwell Partnership, St. Ebbes lies roughly in the middle in terms of homework intensity.
- Research shows that homework has no significant positive impact at primary school level. However, parent engagement is found to be a very important factor in children's performance, so the school tries to use homework to encourage this.
- Spelling and basic fluency in numeracy have been identified as areas in need of improvement across the school. The basic skills of reading, spelling and times tables have therefore been chosen as the focus of homework. A firm grounding in these is beneficial for all children and particularly important for those who have less support at home. This is complemented by project work to encourage creative, artistic and technological exploration at home (partly in light of the lack of space given to these areas by the new curriculum). Teachers feel positive about this system.
- While teachers' resources do not permit a differentiation of homework given within one class, teachers do provide parents with ideas of how to make e.g. basic maths homework more engaging and interesting for keen children.
- The school feels happy with the current homework policy but recognises it cannot be right for everyone; the issue will be put forward to the Curriculum Committee of the Governors for review.
- With regard to maths, CW clarified that the new national curriculum (which came in two years ago) focuses on mastery of basic numerical fluency and on all children going forward at a similar pace. This is very different from the old curriculum, which had a heavier focus on high achievement in this area. This explains why parents with more than one child at the school may be experiencing apparent inconsistencies in teaching between the year groups.

- The school is actively considering whether the current framework is providing enough challenge for high-achievers in maths.
- Two parent meetings on maths mastery are planned for early next year.

ACTION:

- Governors' Curriculum Committee to review homework policy.
- CW and Gawain Little will be running two maths curriculum events.
- CW to investigate whether further maths curriculum information can be uploaded to the website.

6) ATL as Garry class representative raised the issue of sugar consumption at school. Both the sweet school dinner puddings and the frequency of other sweet snacks or treats are felt to be an issue.

School dinners are provided by Oxfordshire County Council's main provider, Carrillion. This gives the school very little leeway in terms of negotiating menus. However, awareness could be raised within the whole school of healthier alternatives to birthday sweets and cake-based treats.

ACTION:

- CW to clarify with kitchen if parents could opt out of sweet puddings for their child/ren, and of the process for this.
- "Healthy eating" working group to be formed by JW, ATL, SH, LB and other parents to investigate any flexibility in the school dinner provision with regard to sweet desserts and awareness-raising campaigns around school generally

7) ATL as Garry class representative raised the issue of a high tree next to the fence in the Early Years garden, which could pose a safety risk. The school has looked at this and considers it a managed risk; children have been made aware and given clear rules, the staff at playtime are aware and the area is looked at regularly as part of the risk assessment. However, the specific tree/fence combination will be checked again

ACTION:

- CW to assess risk together with caretaker.
[This has been actioned, week ending 18.11.2016]

8) A broad point raised regarding the school's mission was carried forward to the next meeting, as the presenting parent representative was not present.