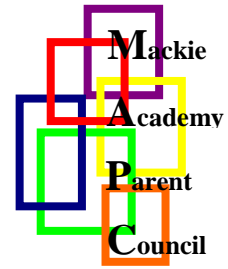


Meeting of Mackie Academy Parent Council



Tuesday 25 April 2017

PRESENT: Karen Allan, Cllr Raymond Christie, Evelyn Gillies, Rhona Grant (Clerk), Fiona Harris, Jacqui Hutchison (Chairperson), Elaine Kininmonth, Sheila Lees, Karen McClymont, Vicky McGillivray, Dawn Milroy, Kim Milton, Louise Moir (Rector), Marc Nunn, Victoria Park, Keith Petrie, Fiona Ritchie, Rachel Shanks, Lesley Tullock

APOLOGIES: Morag Coull, Andy Forster, Billy Morrison, Teresa Mugford, Isobel Townsend

WELCOME

Jacqui welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies for absence were noted.

MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the previous meeting, held on 1 February were approved.

MATTERS ARISING

Jacqui advised that she had written a letter of thanks to Sharon Jamieson, Head of the Library Service in recognition of the significant improvements to the service being provided to the school, and she had indicated that she would be willing to attend a future meeting should we so wish.

Vicky again requested a volunteer to take on the responsibility of operating the Twitter account.

There was detailed discussion on the following Matters Arising:

School Transport Meeting

Louise reported that a meeting had been arranged with Stagecoach staff, also attended by Isobel, Kat Thoirs and a representative from Aberdeenshire's Public Transport Unit. Louise advised that the Stagecoach staff had been very open and honest, and had acknowledged that the service being provided had not been good enough. They had informed of the action they were taking in relation to driver training, including how to react in the event of an incident, and of ensuring that standards generally were raised to an acceptable level. Louise said that an improvement had been noticed. All contact details have been updated and after 4 pm, when the school office is unmanned, a mobile number for a member of the Senior Management Team will be available. Parents also will be provided with a direct phone number and an email address.

Louise advised that a letter had been issued to parents informing them of the above details.

Jacqui said that Isobel had been impressed by the positive attitude from Stagecoach staff, and asked if the roadworks had had any impact on the service bus timetable. Louise stated that there had been no noticeable effect but it has been emphasised to students that they should ensure that they allow enough time to arrive at school in good time for an exam, because the SQA will not accept traffic issues as an allowable reason for attending late for an exam.

Parents' Evenings

Jacqui indicated that our attendance at Parents evenings has made a difference to raising awareness of the Parent Council and said that it was worthwhile to continue to build it up.

Jacqui listed the feedback provided by parents and there was discussion on some of the comments as follows:

On the subject of Parents Evenings, the only complaint had been about the noise levels in the hall. The feeling from parents was that using the hall worked well, and Louise noted that one benefit of using the hall means that members of the Senior Team are on hand to support teachers, if required. It had been queried if longer appointments could be available. Louise said that it was important to underline that where parents feel they need longer time to talk, the school will do its best to create that time although not at Parents Evenings.

There had been a query on the timing of the S3 Parents Evenings. Louise explained that it had been decided to hold the S3 evening earlier so that a clear picture could be given in time to address any issues as necessary. The S3 report would be issued in February followed by the Senior Phase Evening when students and parents would have enough information to choose the best options for them.

Louise added that a lot of work has been done in increasing attendance at parents evenings, and there has been a much better turn-out.

Fiona (Ritchie) voiced the opinion that it had been a very worthwhile evening and the flexibility provided the opportunity to speak to people as desired.

School uniform had been another topic. Louise felt that the best approach was to highlight the positive aspects for the school and to point out to students that when entering the workforce they will be judged on how they are dressed.

Survey

Louise advised that the survey is ready to be issued once a brief narrative setting out the context of the survey has been prepared. Louise explained that it can be sent out direct to parents, with a link on the website. Rachel recommended that one reminder is also put out as necessary.

Louise suggested that the survey is issued now to S1 to S3 parents, targeting S5 and S6 on their return in June. This was agreed.

Changes to National 5 Qualifications

Louise provided a brief background to the proposed changes. She explained that John Swinney (Education Minister) had made the decision to review the structure of the National 5

qualification with a view to reducing teachers' workload. He had then decided to remove Unit assessments (UASPS) from 2017/18 onwards. Louise clarified that UASPS are broadly set around a C Grade and when a student passed the UASP they could then go on to sit the exam. Although there were logistics in that a pupil could sit the UASP when ready to do so, it could provide a clear picture if the student could pass the exam whilst recognising that it only gave a base line since it did not project beyond a C Grade. Furthermore, if a student completed all the assessments and did not pass the exam a National 4 qualification could be awarded. This will no longer be the case.

Louise reported that every subject will experience changes, each in a different way, and in some the coursework element has changed; for instance, practical woodworking will now include a written exam. An added issue is that there is a very short time span between the SQA detailing the changes and teachers beginning to teach according to those changes.

Vicky pointed out that teachers have become used to the changes to education and they will find a way to adapt, to minimise the disruption to pupils. Lesley stressed that the current S3 students have experienced academic changes every year.

Louise explained that some pupils will have to re-sit units, and the financial implications of some units now sitting outside the Core Offer, mean that the school will have to fund them out of the Per Capita Budget. Jacqui pointed out the potential financial implications for the school as well querying how this helped reduce the attainment gap.

Louise said that currently students sit estimate exams in January. The school has until 31 March to inform the SQA of numbers for each exam, but it is now intended that schools will decide in November who will be sitting what at National 4 and National 5.

Jacqui queried who the SQA is answerable to, and Louise explained that it is a quango and therefore autonomous to some extent. Cllr Christie pointed out that the SQA should be answerable to the Scottish Government, and it was agreed that there appears to be a breakdown in communication between the Scottish Government and the SQA.

Louise advised that there had been a consultation with numerous representatives at the working group meetings but it appears that some consequences were not fully appreciated. Jacqui thought that the teaching staff would not have agreed to what has been decided, had they known the outcome. Louise explained that Mr Swinney did consult a panel that included teaching union representatives. Fiona (Harris) asked if there had been a period of consultation. Vicky said that there had been a brief consultation.

Louise said that the range for a Grade D mark has been extended from 45-49% to 40-49%. However the element of Recognising Positive Achievement currently in place will only remain for an interim period of a year and then be removed.

Jacqui noted that the deadlines are imminent and Louise agreed. She pointed out that the new S4 timetable begins on 8 May. The document detailing the changes is a complicated one and there is also no room for manoeuvre. Lesley asked if all Secondary Head Teachers had written to complain, and Louise confirmed that they had. Louise voiced the opinion that Mr Swinney had not been properly advised of what was meant by "Recognising Positive Achievement".

Jacqui thought that perhaps the intentions had been good but they had gone badly wrong. Vicky offered an assurance that teachers would try to ensure a smooth transition for pupils. Lesley reiterated that the teachers' workload had increased rather than reduced. Louise again highlighted the financial implications in that having available funding could be an issue.

Fiona (Ritchie) queried the ability to project a pupil's grade without the guidance of UASPS. Louise advised that the initial submission will be due in November. Any changes to that projection in the final submission will be liable to a payment.

Lesley asked if the Council has entered into discussions with the SQA. Louise confirmed that there have been two meetings with a representative from the SQA but little clarity had been forthcoming.

Fiona (Harris) queried why the changes were being rushed through and Louise advised that that question had been asked but it had not been answered.

Jacqui undertook to ascertain from Bob Jones of the National Parent Forum if a collective response to Mr Swinney is being prepared.

Louise said that pupils have previously been encouraged to work towards a C Grade as a minimum, even if that meant over two years, and it is not helpful if that is no longer an option. Lesley pointed out that budgeting could be a major issue for some schools.

Louise underlined the importance of putting out the information on the changes to current S3 students and parents. A focused evening, with discussion groups, will be arranged once parents have advised what information they require to know.

Lesley said that S3 students are anxious about the changes and there is a perception that they are always the "guinea pigs".

Louise stated that she would draft a letter and circulate it to parent members for their input before it is issued to the parent body. Jacqui said that most parents just want to know exactly what is changing and the implications of those changes.

EQUITY FUNDING

Louise advised of a new initiative which is being implemented with a view to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. She explained that each school has been allocated £1200 per S1-S3 pupil who is eligible for free school meals. In Mackie this equates to £38,400. It has been recommended that each school is given the full sum and Aberdeenshire Council has done so. It is the intention that partnerships will be formed with the cluster schools and other relevant agencies. Paper-work will be kept to a minimum but it will be accountable, and reflected in the Improvement Planning process.

Louise said that discussions have been held at cluster level to develop something that will be of benefit to all pupils and it has been agreed to buy into a programme of professional development for all staff in the cluster over a 3-year period. Louise underlined the need to develop the Broad General Education phase from early years, and all staff will be able to work together for the next three years. There will also be a sum of money for the literacy/numeracy programmes as they develop so it will link nicely into the Senior Phase, and there will also be work with the Tree of Knowledge. Louise explained that there appears to be a connection to attendance in that 6% of students have less than 85% attendance, but the percentage rises to 18% for pupils eligible for free school meals. Accordingly, health and wellbeing will be looked at with the first aider and the school nurse to see if attendance can be improved, if a different approach is taken.

SCHOOL BUSINESS

Staffing

Louise provided a comprehensive update on staffing, advising that 4 probationers had been retained and appointments had been made in Science and English. Also, a full time librarian is being recruited into the library network who will be working at Mackie in the new academic year.

Rachel queried Science staffing and Louise said that with new recruitment it had been addressed so that there is a good balance over the 3 subjects.

Dawn advised that there had been complaints about the consistency in teaching and the fact that there appeared to be no proper hand-over between teachers. Louise explained that supply staff had been employed so there could have been issues. She requested that specific details were provided outwith the meeting so that any necessary action can be taken and lessons can be learned.

Property

Louise advised that reports were due to Property by the end of April in relation to the Curtain Walling Project and it would be very helpful to organise a meeting as soon as possible after that, to ensure that all involved fully realise the impact on the school, and the level of organisation that will be required.

Cllr Christie said he had raised the subject at a recent Council meeting and had been informed that the project is on schedule.

Budgets

Louise reported that schools operate on a tight budget and therefore it is important for them to carefully manage money. One area where savings can be made is in staffing and the underspend has traditionally been used to give a sum to each faculty and carry out any necessary work around the school. However, £50,000 has been clawed back by Aberdeenshire. Furthermore, the budget is based on the projection of pupil numbers in March and since the actual numbers are lower than anticipated another £20,000 has been lost.

Lesley underlined that the schools who have managed their funding well are being penalised, and Louise agreed that other schools are in a similar position.

Louise said that the school had also set aside money for necessary work following the curtain walling project such as new blinds. Cllr Christie pointed out that anything needed as a result of the project should have been included in the contract.

Fiona (Harris) asked about fundraising. Louise said that it was a possibility but ideally PTA funds should be used to enhance learning.

All agreed that the situation was unacceptable.

AOB

Plastic Bottles

Karen (Allen) queried what was happening in relation to plastic bottles. It was explained that the janitorial team are creating a visual reminder of the waste being generated by the bottles not being recycled. Louise said that discussions are ongoing about the worth of giving new S1 students a water bottle or installing a water fountain, and it will be necessary to include the catering service in discussions. Karen (McClymont) advised that they are also working on the topic in tutor time, to see what would encourage pupils to recycle or re-use bottles. Parental engagement will be helpful too.

Work Experience

Fiona (Ritchie) enquired about Work Experience. Louise advised that 70 pupils are taking part, and it has been emphasised that the experience should be focused towards participants' future career plans. The list of those taking part is provided to staff so that they are aware who will be absent and can adapt accordingly. Louise clarified that each school is allocated a week for Work Experience and there is little opportunity for negotiation but she thought it likely that as the Developing Young Workforce initiative takes shape there will be a lesser uptake for Work Experience.

Cllr Christie advised that this could be his last meeting in light of the forthcoming local elections. He explained that in the event of his re-election there was no guarantee that he would return to Mackie as the Area Committee decides which schools each Councillor will attend. Jacqui thanked him for all his support and efforts on behalf of Mackie.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

As already notified, the next scheduled meeting will be held on Wednesday 21 June 2017.