



## Meeting of Mackie Academy Parent Council

**Wednesday 7 October 2020**

**PRESENT:** Dawn Black, Patricia Bruce, Colin Esslemont, Andrea Forster, Rhona Grant (Clerk), Chris Ann Holt, Carol Howie, Louise Moir (Head Teacher), Marion Montgomery, Lisa Macaulay, Cllr Dennis Robertson, Richard Sharp, Mandy Tulloch, Lisa Williams

**APOLOGIES:** Morag Coull, Cllr Sarah Dickinson, Paula Durward (Chair), Fiona Hogg, Elaine Mitchell, Mhari Mitchell, Aileen McKellar, Karen McClymont, Susan Purvis, Fiona Ritchie

**IN ATTENDANCE:** Observers (Members of the Parent Forum)

### 1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the meeting was convened virtually by Microsoft Teams. Patricia Bruce, Vice Chair, chaired the meeting in Paula Durward's absence. Patricia welcomed everyone to the meeting, especially observers.

### 2. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were noted.

### 3. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 22 September 2020, were approved. Their adoption as a true record was proposed by Dawn Black and seconded by Colin Esslemont.

### 4. MATTERS ARISING

Any matters arising were covered in the agenda.

### 5. SQA UPDATE



Louise stressed that the announcement from the Education Minister in respect of the exam process for 2020/21 had only been made earlier that day meaning that no further detail was yet available but she was in a position to provide the headlines. Louise advised that for 2020/21 there will be no National 5 exams and an alternative certification process via assessment will be implemented. It is intended however to hold Higher and Advanced Higher exams between 13 May and 4 June but the timetable has not yet been drawn up. Louise explained that usually there is one subject per day for exams but it is doubtful whether that could be accomplished within a three-week period and it may be that several subjects are covered each day. The results will be published on 10 August 2021.

Louise advised that the statement on the SQA website gives broad guidelines only at this stage but it is known that the evidence required will focus more on quality rather than quantity, and the estimates process will be similar to last year's. More detailed guidance on the National 5 process will be provided after the October holiday period. Additional resources will be provided and liaison with schools and colleges will be ongoing to ensure that standards, fairness and transparency are maintained throughout the process.

The timetable for the Higher and Advanced Higher exams will also be issued after the holidays, and a contingency plan is being developed in the event that exams cannot be held as planned.

Carol Howie asked if it is intended to publish all results on 10 August. Louise said that is the intention, as far as she is aware, since there had been no indication otherwise.

Richard Sharp expressed disappointment that the first time this year's S4 students will experience exam conditions is when they sit Higher exams. Louise agreed that it is a concern, with a further one being that prior to the Covid-19 measures the duration of exams had increased, which means that S5 students will have to sit a lengthy exam session with no previous experience other than National 5 estimates which had been curtailed because of Covid-19 restrictions.

Louise advised that they are now giving thought to how best they can cover exams in each subject area. Previously, 150 students could easily be accommodated in the hall however a limit of 50 pupils means that other potential sites have to be identified, and it is anticipated that the SQA will issue guidance on the criteria for using multiple sites. One positive factor is that most invigilators who have been contacted have indicated their willingness to cover exam sessions for Highers and Advanced Highers and it is intended to hold estimate exams but there will be resultant disruption and so it is necessary to review what else is happening within school at that time. For example, the main hall and the boys' and girls' gyms could possibly be used. The Higher English exam would have the largest number of candidates and those three spaces could accommodate that number.

Unfortunately, it will not be possible to arrange National 5 estimate exams but it might be possible to set up some form of exam experience within the classroom, and this will be given



further consideration once the SQA requirements for the 2-4 pieces of assessment are known. Richard agreed that it would be helpful for S4 students to have that exam experience

Cllr Robertson asked about the possibility of using an external venue for exams. Louise said that it could be something that schools will have to consider in future, to comply with restrictions. She explained that the spaces identified are currently being used for wet weather facilities therefore it would not be ideal for them to be out of use for any length of time, so it could perhaps be worthwhile to utilise premises outwith the school, since it would be valuable to students to have the estimate exam experience.

Richard advised that he had listened to Mr Swinney's statement and he personally was of the opinion that the wrong decision has been made, and he did not think that any other options had been fully explored. He also thought that possibly the decision had been taken too early in the school year but he optimistically hoped that lessons had been learned from this year's process.

Louise explained that a well-respected Professor of Education had been commissioned to review the process but unfortunately his findings have not been shared publicly; only the decisions are in the public domain and not the reasoning behind them. Richard pointed out that while an opportunity was given to express viewpoints, it had come very late in the process and it seems likely that there had been very little parental input. *The aforementioned document has now been published and can be found at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/rapid-review-national-qualifications-experience-2020/>.*

Dawn expressed the opinion that it seemed like a good balance since, with the current restrictions, it would be problematic to accommodate National 5 exams, and she favoured continuous assessment rather than exams anyway. Colin agreed and said he thought that assessment was a better approach.

Louise pointed out that deciding the process this early in the school year allows time to consider what can be done differently this time round. She indicated that since the exam period ends on 4 June there should be time to assess how to enhance the transition from National 5 qualifications to Highers, and hopefully it will be possible to offer some form of exam experience.

Carol queried how the transitions will be managed. Louise said that they are still considering how best to organise it. She explained that previously a student would have talked it through with the class teacher to determine whether they should progress with the subject. It has been decided where there is some doubt that the student should begin the course until the results come through since waiting until August could mean that a student misses a chunk of teaching. It is intended also that the options process will be carried out online.



Louise advised that during the first week back in school after the holidays it is intended to meet with staff to discuss the implications, and once more detailed information is available a statement will be issued to parents, giving them as much information as possible at that point.

Marion Montgomery said that it was helpful to have extra time for preparation. Louise agreed but said that it can be frustrating too and it will be interesting to learn what the S4 students themselves think of the situation. Obviously, they are the ones most affected and therefore it is important to seek their views.

## **6. SCHOOL BUSINESS**

### **(a) Staffing Changes**

Louise said that, as previously advised, Alan Tullock would be leaving Mackie at the end of the week. Louise reported that Alan had been at Mackie for 6 years and during that time his IT skills had been well used, and he had also upskilled staff in utilising digital technology for teaching. This meant the school had been more prepared for the current circumstances than would otherwise have been the case and it is in a stronger position because staff now have confidence to build on and enhance their digital skills.

Louise said that the opportunity has been taken to re-shuffle the remit of the Depute Head posts. Laura Larkworthy will be returning from maternity leave, and the 2 Acting Depute Head positions will increase to full time posts which will be helpful when addressing anticipated future challenges. Recruitment into the Learning Intervention posts has begun and Louise was hopeful that they would be filled shortly.

Louise stressed that staff attendance has been outstanding which has been very helpful, but we are heading towards the winter months and there is also the possibility of further restrictions. There will be increasing risk factors to address which the school will have to take into account to ensure everyone's health and safety is paramount. While teaching could be done from home, classroom cover would be required in school and pupils need the input of specialist teaching so it has to be decided how best to deliver that for each year group, recognising there is a duty of care to staff as well as to students.

Dawn asked if decisions were being made at a local or national level. Louise said the Scottish Government website questionnaire is being used to determine someone's "Covid age". If a person is deemed to be in a high-risk category, a one-to-one discussion with an Occupational Health medical professional will be organised followed by the professional's recommendations. Staff members have enjoyed being back at school and none of them wants to be working from home but the risk factors, and the implications, have to be taken into account; and of course circumstances could change again during the holidays.



Dawn asked which figures are used currently. Louise said that Aberdeenshire's Head Teachers have had weekly briefings with NHS Grampian which have been very helpful, and means that measures are considered at a local level.

#### **(b) Contingency Planning**

Louise reported that contingency planning is ongoing, and the various options are being considered in the event of a national or local lockdown, so that it can be managed well and minimise education loss. Most pupils will engage with Google Meets but there are other issues to be addressed, such as teaching staff who have their own children at home, limiting their ability to teach.

Currently work is focusing on determining the minimum expectations for each year group with a view to being able to maintain that at least. It is also important to ensure that staff have IT devices allocated to them so that if the school closed down suddenly, they would have the tools immediately available to enable them to work from home. Louise explained that someone's role within the Council determines what type of device is allocated to them. Accordingly, it is hoped to replace desktop computers with corporate laptops so that staff can access the various systems, such as SEEMIS, from home.

Louise explained the SEEMIS system in general terms and voiced some frustrations with the system. She said that, for instance, information contained in the reports template has not been updated making it necessary to include an explanatory letter with each report, for clarification. Richard queried the possibility of utilising an alternative system. Dawn suggested that perhaps a campaign could be started to source an alternative to SEEMIS.

Cllr Robertson suggested that it was something that the Audit Committee might look at and he undertook to have a preliminary chat to Dawn about the subject.

#### **(c) Focus Groups**

Louise advised that she had met with two groups of S5 pupils and the S6 students thereafter. She said that there had been positive discussions with all groups and the students had provided measured and honest responses, and had grasped the reasoning behind changes especially those not related to Covid 19 that had already been at the planning stage prior to lockdown. There had been positive feedback in respect of the changes in structure and the beneficial impact on practical subjects where the longer periods of time have been appreciated. There were mixed responses about the longer periods of theory but that could of course relate to differing styles of teaching. It was noted that capacity to focus is easier in the morning, but the later lunchtime means that more learning takes place in the morning which has been helpful. They all agreed that the later start to the day works well for them, and they all liked the one subject per day arrangement.



Most students struggled with concentration in Maths at all levels, and while Advanced Higher students will benefit from the extra time it is something that will be monitored going forward.

Google Classroom is seen as a positive factor but there is a variance in how much material is posted and this will be discussed with staff. The S5 students are struggling somewhat with the pace of learning but that is usual at this stage.

Louise said there were positive discussions about the use of the fifth period. She clarified that four periods are timetabled, and the fifth “floats”. This is working well for some students, but others are finding it challenging and they will be supported to make the best use of this period.

It was agreed that the following would be requested from staff:

- That the work set fits the 55 minutes period;
- That work set for that period is clearly defined as separate to homework;
- That time is allowed for consolidation of new learning to ensure that it has been fully grasped;
- That all materials used in lessons are posted on Google Classrooms.

The S6 students have more flexibility and they are enjoying the set up. They have more time for consolidation too but those that are not “morning persons” have to pick up the time elsewhere. The students also understand that they are being overloaded with teaching just now, in case of a future lockdown.

Some students said that they did not like the new set-up at all, but others could see how they are learning life skills, for instance no job requires you to move around every 55 minutes.

Louise advised that the findings will be shared with teaching staff following the holidays.

Lisa Williams said that it would be helpful if all content is posted on Google Classrooms, especially if a day’s teaching is missed.

Louise agreed and said that the students were pro-active in seeking solutions and appreciative of all that the staff are doing for them.

Dawn pointed out that the positive relationship between staff and senior pupils was obvious and commended the school for ensuring that they are being given a voice. Louise said that because of the split lunchtimes she is now able to speak to the senior students regularly during the lunch break.



Patricia thanked Louise for all the helpful information and the reassurance that the students are being listened to and their views sought. Louise said that S1 and S2 students can be vocal too and Patricia said that it is a positive factor that they all feel able to voice their opinions.

## 7. AOB

Several parents advised that there have been problems with loading money onto their child's pre-paid card. Louise said that she was aware of the problems because the office staff have had to field all the queries. However, the cards are processed centrally and Louise undertook to obtain, and pass on, the contact details for the relevant team so that the issues can be resolved. ***IPay Impact contact number : 0345 6081202***

Colin advised that his children prefer the new arrangement of wearing PE kit to school. Louise said that it has proved popular with the students and it is unlikely that it will change during the current school year. The latest guidance for PE is that it will continue outside during the winter months and the Faculty Head is now working on a plan. The PE staff have all worked hard to meet the challenges and there has been more participation this year. Of course, the young people are also enjoying being able to participate in sports with their friends.

Louise advised that it has been decided to have a Fancy Dress Day on 30 October, since Hallowe'en will not be happening in its usual format this year. There will be competitions and donations to the local food bank will be requested.

## 8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

As already notified, the next meeting will be held on 4 November 2020.

Patricia thanked everyone for their participation and contribution to discussions and closed the meeting.



**DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS : 2021**

21 January

23 February

24 March

6 May

15 June