



## Meeting of Mackie Academy Parent Council

**Wednesday 9 December 2020**

**PRESENT:** Dawn Black, Patricia Bruce, Morag Coull, Lorna Findlay, Andrea Forster, Rhona Grant (Clerk), Carol Howie, Elaine Mitchell, Louise Moir (Head Teacher), Marion Montgomery, Lisa Macaulay, Cllr Dennis Robertson, Richard Sharp

**APOLOGIES:** Cllr Sarah Dickinson, Paula Durward (Chair), Colin Esslemont, Fiona Hogg, Chris Ann Holt, Mhari Mitchell, Karen McClymont, Aileen McKellar, Susan Purvis, Fiona Ritchie, Mandy Tulloch, Lisa Williams

**IN ATTENDANCE:** 1 Observer  
Depute Heads – Laura Larkworthy, Fiona Stark, Kat Thoires

### 1. WELCOME INTRODUCTIONS AND APOLOGIES

In Paula Durward's absence, Patricia Bruce chaired the meeting. Patricia welcomed everyone to the meeting, and offered a reminder of the intention to keep the meeting as focused as possible.

Apologies for absence were noted.

### 2. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

Louise introduced Depute Head Teachers Fiona Stark, with responsibility for Pupil Support; Kat Thoires, with responsibility for Learning & Teaching and Laura Larkworthy, the SQA Co-ordinator.

Louise pointed out that, as everyone was aware, there have been further developments since the previous meeting. Louise explained that the most recent announcement had been anticipated to some extent since it had been quite clear during a virtual conference in November that the Scottish Government planned to make the decision in respect of Highers and Advanced Highers exams prior to the Christmas holidays. Louise stressed that, since the cancellation of Highers and Advanced Highers exams for 2020/21 had been announced only the previous day, the information in respect of that would be of a general nature.

Louise advised that the term has been a challenging one; although there have been no Covid-19 cases to contend with there have been other pressures. However, staff



attendance has been outstanding and there is also a dedicated team of supply staff which has helped greatly and meant that any disruption to learning has been minimal.

Louise underlined that, whilst the decision relating to National 5 exams had been made some time ago, more detailed information had only recently been provided and there will now be a further period whilst information relating to Highers and Advanced Highers is awaited.

Louise explained that initially they had only received general guidance in respect of the National 5 assessment process and the breadth of evidence required for specific subjects was still being received up until the end of November and only then was there a clearer picture of what the SQA will be looking for, explicitly, for each subject. Staff are now studying the details and deciding how best to proceed. Each subject will have a written paper, provided by the SQA, for each pupil as well as other assessments and a portfolio of work.

Faculty Heads are drawing up a calendar of assessments which it is hoped will be available by the end of term. The assessments will be spaced out over the term, or term and a half for some subjects; depending on the type of subject. Students will be fully advised for each method of assessment eg whether it is a written paper or for their portfolio. It is intended that students will be kept as informed as possible so that there will be no surprises for them. All S4 students have been advised of the conduct that will be expected from them in respect of the written pieces of work; and ensuring that they know what to expect so that they are prepared as much as possible.

In respect of Highers and Advanced Highers, estimate exams had already been prepared which could be used for the assessment process and it is hoped that more detailed information will become available shortly. It is known that the SQA intend to carry out quality assurance checks within schools and it will be ensured that everyone is aware of the process; students and parents as well as staff.

Louise explained that the process for National 5 awards will be significantly different this year, for instance there will be no algorithms or estimates which previously threw up the anomalies.

Schools will submit provisional awards to the SQA by the end of May and the SQA will carry out checks, nationally, in June. Any issues will be flagged up so that there is uniformity across the board, regardless of which school a student attends. It is unknown currently whether there will be any form of appeal process.

A lot of work has already been carried out in preparation for Highers and Advanced Highers exams and that time will be utilised as assessment windows. Written papers will be used as well as professional judgement. It is anticipated that there will be one assessment window

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MackiePC@hotmail.co.uk



around end January/beginning February and another towards the beginning of March; which will also allow time for any student who has been unwell or self-isolating to catch up. There will be assessments at other times but these will be the critical assessment periods providing key pieces of evidence and their importance will be highlighted to students.

Dawn Black asked about plans for study leave. Louise advised that it has been discussed briefly but no decisions have been made and they will depend on the health of the community at the time. It could be that bubbles for senior pupils might be worthwhile and if they are not in school full time it is possible that there will be an element of “exam leave”.

Louise clarified that the assessment windows for National 5 are easier to manage. For instance, English and Maths have liaised to ensure all English and Maths students sit the paper at the same time; thereby ensuring the integrity of the paper. Again, however, health issues could play a factor, and whatever restrictions are in place after the holidays.

### **3. SQA ARRANGEMENTS UPDATE**

Richard Sharp requested further information about the written paper to be supplied by the SQA. Laura Larkworthy explained that the document is intended to be a key piece of evidence for each pupil, for each subject. It is a question paper, accessible to staff, and SQA view it as a support to teachers, bearing in mind their workloads, and it is expected that it will be utilised. Pupils will be asked to sit the paper as part of the information and evidence gathering process and teachers will advise which timeframe best suits their subject; so far quite a few are in favour of the January/February and March option.

Richard queried how the content of the paper will be protected if each school utilises the papers at different times. Laura advised that it is a point which has been raised with the SQA. As far as Mackie is concerned, steps have been taken to mitigate any potential issues. Students have been/will be informed of the expected conduct. It will also be ensured that papers remain within the classroom and photos will be forbidden. The papers will be kept as secure as possible, but it should be remembered that the written paper is only one piece of the “jigsaw”. Pupils do understand the importance of the paper and they want to approach it as well-prepared as they can be; also although each school is of course unique, the academies throughout Aberdeenshire are trying to be consistent in their approach.

Louise said that between January and April the SQA will request a sample of the process being used and will provide their feedback. Evidence will be required of holistic pieces of assessment demonstrating breadth and depth hence the importance of having 2 assessment windows. Louise underlined that there have been some significantly mixed responses from the affected pupils. This is the second year without exams and some students find it daunting that they could be in S6 before they experience an exam. However, there are

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positive relationships between pupils and staff within Mackie and the students will be fully supported.

It is hoped to inform parents before the holidays so that they know what to expect, specifically where possible, and generally otherwise. Further information in respect of Highers and Advanced Highers will be provided as it becomes available.

#### **4. BLENDED LEARNING**

Louise explained that plans have been progressed for blended learning whilst hoping that they do not have to be implemented. It is doubtful that schools will close entirely but it is recognised that January to March will be especially challenging, when there will be the usual bugs to contend with as well as Covid-19. Mackie has been very fortunate so far, but the timetable arrangements and being outside in fresh air as much as possible have been worthwhile; together with the high level of compliance with the current restrictions demonstrated by staff and students.

Richard underlined that, whilst luck had played a part, the fact that there has been minimal disruption for a second term is mostly due to the sterling efforts of the staff.

Kat Thoirs delivered a presentation detailing the blended learning options for students in the Senior Phase and in Broad General Education and explained the plans for the respective models A and B. She clarified what is meant by blended learning and what it could possibly look like before sharing the examples.

Kat highlighted the various supports available to parents/students for home schooling and offered an assurance that the Additional Support for Learning service within school would continue. She said also that decisions are ongoing as to how best to split pupils within year groups.

Louise explained that a key factor is the necessity to reduce the bubble numbers with a view to decreasing direct and proximity contacts and length of time of contact. She advised that, for example, teachers in Aberdeen have been instructed to remain within their 2-metre box in the classroom, and that strategy will be deployed along with others if the situation continues to deteriorate. Also, if there is a requirement to reduce contact levels within school there will be a move towards blended learning. Louise stressed, however, that a very precise set of circumstances would occur before blended learning is introduced.

Louise requested that parents consider the different options and feedback their preference via Rhona.



## 5. HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF STAFF AND PUPILS

Fiona Stark reported that the staff's care and support of each other and their care of the students has been exceptional. Fiona emphasised that staff really care for Mackie's young people, as is evidenced by the positive relationships that exist between staff and students.

However, it has been recognised that some young people are presenting with challenging behaviour due to the current circumstances. It is important, therefore, to gather information on their health and wellbeing via PSE classes using the SHANARI indicators so that appropriate support can be offered where necessary. It is the practice that pupils are asked to complete a questionnaire and the scoring is looked at over time to see where there are changes and flag up any concerns. It has been noticeable that there have been changes in how the pupils are rating themselves. They have said they feel nurtured at home and at school and that they feel safe in school because of the measures that have been put in place. There have however been a few worries about achieving their potential and managing their time effectively, and the SQA uncertainties are having a negative effect. It is recognised that sharing information about the assessment process as quickly and comprehensively as possible will help to alleviate that concern.

The responses will be shared with the Educational Psychology Service for their professional input as to the best way to support students and help to allay their fears.

S1 to S3 students have been/will be asked to complete a Mental Health & Wellbeing questionnaire so that necessary resources can be implemented as and when required. There are trained mental health champions among members of staff and S5 students. A classroom has been designated as a wellbeing space at lunchtimes and it is being used by pupils who want to speak to someone about their concerns.

There is also a new cluster resource in the person of a school counsellor who will be in Mackie for one day per week. There is a referral process where there are significant concerns for a pupil's wellbeing and the Counsellor can see up to 5 pupils per day in Mackie. Referrals can also be submitted to the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service, should there be a need to do so.

There are also S1 and S2 support groups and health and wellbeing support, as well as the usual transition work, for P7 pupils in the cluster primaries.

Community Learning support is also available and when it is possible to do so it is intended to use the Community Police to educate students in respect of inappropriate social media use and the negative impact that can have on those on the receiving end. When it is possible to do so, the Community Police Officer will be invited into the school to carry out targeted work to highlight the legal implications of inappropriate social media use as well as the negative impact for the recipients.



Staff have been advised of their trained colleagues so that they are aware that they have someone they can talk to, should they wish to do so. It is important to ensure that staff are well supported too and are fully aware of the network of support that they can access.

Fiona pointed out that the uncertainties of an ever-changing situation can in itself bring challenges and anxieties for the young people and accordingly they are trying to be proactive and reactive, in providing the necessary support to pupils and staff and ensuring all updated information is passed on as quickly as possible.

Patricia indicated that obviously health and wellbeing is a subject of interest to all parents. She advised that her daughter had recently been asked to complete the questionnaire and Patricia had a sense that the importance of answering the questions as accurately as possible had not been explained sufficiently clearly to the pupils.

Fiona explained that they have tried different methods to obtain the information and previously she herself had met with pupils to explain the process, and underline its importance, and she undertook to ensure that the message is reiterated more fully and with more emphasis on the importance of answering the questions accurately.

## **6. TIMETABLE 2021/22**

Louise said that timetable planning for 2021/22 will begin in January and, since the exam diet no longer has to be factored in, it may be that consideration will be given to changing the timetable earlier than usual. Also, there were elements of the Senior Phase timetable which were accelerated or introduced this year because of Covid-19 and which the school would like to continue post- Covid-19.

Elaine Davidson now has responsibility for timetabling and she is seeking four or five volunteer parents across the year groups with whom she could share ideas or suggestions. No working knowledge of timetabling is required, participation would be via email or short virtual meetings and input would be very helpful for informing key decisions. It was requested that any volunteers advise Rhona by 21 January.

Richard returned to the subject of blended learning and asked how prepared Mackie is to implement it. Kat said that some elements have still to be decided upon, depending on which model is chosen but staff have worked hard on developing their technology skills which has increased their self-confidence. Structures have been put in place and staff are ready, should blended learning happen, both psychologically and practically.

Louise advised that the Google suite of tools has opened up following lockdown and staff could run virtual lessons with students, or students who are unwell or self-isolating could join in lessons from home.



Louise explained that Aberdeenshire has 2 network systems and previously teachers did not have access to the corporate network. They now have that access but it is linked to their classroom desktop computer and accordingly the school has invested a sum of money so that staff all have corporate laptops, meaning that they are prepared for blended learning or indeed another lockdown. Louise underlined that the school had been in a strong position, technology-wise, and this has now been increased with staff being given the extra level of access outwith school.

#### **7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

As already notified, the next meeting will be held on Wednesday 21 January 2021.

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