



Meeting of Mackie Academy Parent Council

Wednesday 20 March 2024

PRESENT: Sarah Cowling, Rhona Grant (Clerk), Jacqui Hutchison, Claire Kennedy, Louise Moir (Head Teacher); Moira Paterson, Susan Purvis, Richard Sharp (Acting Chair), Mandy Tulloch, Cllr Alan Turner

APOLOGIES: Samantha Bradley, James Brogan, Lewis Campbell, Cllr Sarah Dickinson, Lyn Forman, Elaine Mitchell, Lindsay Robertson, Sarah Smith

IN ATTENDANCE: Fiona Stark (Depute Head Teacher), 1 Observer

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

Richard Sharp welcomed everyone to the meeting, especially one observer.

Apologies for absence were noted.

2. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 21 January 2024, were approved. Their adoption as a true record was proposed by Jacqui Hutchison, seconded by Susan Purvis and agreed by those present.

3. MATTERS ARISING

Richard reminded attendees that at the previous meeting he had advised that Colin Esslemont was aware that he had been unable to attend recent meetings due to work commitments and it was his intention to ascertain future work commitments before deciding how best to proceed. Subsequent to this, Colin had reluctantly resigned from the Parent Council. Richard and Louise had then discussed the situation and had proposed that Richard assume the Chair until the end of the school year, when his tenure as Vice Chair and time on the Parent Council would come to an end. This proposal had been circulated to Parent Council members and no objections had been received but Richard emphasised that

any member who had any questions or wished to discuss the situation should feel free to contact him.

Richard underlined that in any event the Chair and Vice Chair positions will require to be filled in the new school year and encouraged members to give thought to the possibility of serving in either capacity. Richard pointed out that he had found his time on the Parent Council to be valuable and helpful. Richard also acknowledged the time and effort that Colin had expended during his time on the Parent Council, as a member as well as in the position of Chairperson.

Louise advised that at the most recent session with P7/S1 parents the opportunity had been taken to flag up the Parent Council and encourage participation; and they will continue to raise awareness when the opportunity presents itself.

Susan said she had recently taken the chance to share her experience of the Parent Council to some new S1 parents. Jacqui pointed out that it would be helpful for a couple of members to attend future parents' events. Louise agreed and indicated the importance of underlining to parents new to the secondary sector that a secondary school's Parent Council is very different from a primary school Parent Council; the former focusing on the school improvement journey with professional dialogue, parental perspective and challenge where appropriate too. Susan advised that she had assured the parents that membership is not daunting and is very helpful for providing a deeper insight into school business. Louise said that dates of future events will be circulated so that attendance can be organised.

4. SCHOOL BUSINESS

(a) School Attendance

Louise reported that a letter had been issued to parents voicing concerns about attendance rates. She explained that this followed an article from Jenny Gilruth (Education Minister) relating to attendance rates nationally. Attendance has become a political issue and is now included in the areas looked at during school inspections.

Louise shared the letter and the accompanying data. She advised that the live data feed from SEEMIS is looked at on a daily basis and there had been a slight improvement since the letter had gone out but S5 attendance continues to cause the most concern, however a downward trend from S1 to S5 is evident. S6 attendance is very good – likely because of the flexible approach which is working for those students.

Louise explained in broad terms how an absence is denoted as authorised or unauthorised and said that they also look at different trends, with a view to ascertaining where attainment is adversely affected by a high level of absences.

Fiona Stark explained the different categories in more detail and highlighted anomalies such as students on part-time timetables when it has to be ensured that their absence is not categorised as non-attendance.

Richard said that he had listened with interest to a debate from England where it had been stated that staff sometimes visit homes to check if families are in fact on holiday. Louise said that an absence of, say, 2 weeks for a holiday has no significant impact on a student's attainment. Whilst they have had pupils on holiday during the exam period; it is otherwise less impactful than persistent absence.

Jacqui asked if the data could identify the difference between persistent absence and a longer-term illness. Louise explained that absences can be broken down to indicate monthly attendance/late attendance/absence for specific periods or specific days.

It was advised that, as a follow-up, parents will receive a summary of their young person's attendance which will provide a very clear picture of the situation. It was underlined that regular absence is of greater concern. The Pupil Support & Attainment Team manage the data and absences are broken down into 3 categories – red (less than 80%); amber (80% to 90%); and green (90% plus).

Data is available pre and post pandemic and there is also the ability to break down the data into different categories such as House/gender/free school meals eligibility/care experienced young people and also Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) levels 1-3. In the latter category it was pointed out that Mackie's picture is more complex in that there are no general community-wide issues as such, although it is noticeable that the attainment gap is widening. Louise stressed that the profile of Mackie is changing; which fact can be quite challenging to learn and can be met with denial. The number of Care Experienced Young People continues to be very low, but it is notable that when a young person is in care, their attendance is usually good but it can drop when the young person returns home.

Cllr Turner sought confirmation that data indicates that there are some students who do not attend school at all. Louise confirmed that there are non-attenders. If due to a physical illness, arrangements can be put in place to support the young person's learning but there are others who choose not to attend despite all efforts to encourage attendance. Indeed, there are instances in every year group S1 to S4 of students who do not engage with education whatever measures are tried.

Jacqui agreed that circumstances in this area are complex and asked if the school is sufficiently well resourced to support those students and if any extra help is available to the school. Louise explained that staff are doing all they can to offer support to affected pupils but there are some young people who struggled to be in a classroom setting as the pandemic took effect and equally struggled to return to in-school education once lockdown restrictions were lifted. Louise shared details of one such student who had in fact coped well with online learning and had now moved on to a positive destination. Richard underlined that this outcome was testimony to the extra efforts expended by staff and their flexibility while trying as much as possible to support the young people. Louise stressed that the Support for Learning Team are focused and the additional staff member working with Free School Meals students is having a significant positive impact. Obviously, parental support is crucial too and where this is missing, encouraging attendance is even more challenging. It was notable that the Health & Welfare Worker is funded via the Equity Fund and it is not known whether the PEF funding will continue.

Fiona Stark explained that it is likely that all students in the red zone will also have outside agency support; for example a Child's Action Plan and Social Work involvement. Funding for support is available via Learning Pathways but the criteria for eligibility are quite strict.

Richard said that it was apparent that staff have adapted to meet the needs of individual pupils but it seemed obvious that the pandemic has had an impact on current attendance figures. He voiced the opinion that the data reflects the need to review how education is delivered in future. Fiona reported that she had participated in a webinar the previous day which had focused on health and wellbeing. A point had been raised about ensuring that school buildings are fit for purpose, as well as reviewing timetable models and discussing how best to support those students for whom traditional education is a challenge.

A significant number of parents continue to work from home at least some of the time so there has been a shift in family dynamics and occasionally parents cannot seem to grasp that their young person will learn better in school. Richard said he could relate to the fact that parents might be working from home now whereas previously everyone would be leaving the house to attend work or school. However, parents should take responsibility and ensure their young person attends school in person. Having said that, workplaces have adapted to take account of the workforce's expectations nowadays and education needs to do so at some point too.

Louise underlined that they had made rapid progress in effectively utilising technology during the pandemic and some worthwhile measures had been introduced which have now been cast aside. The cost of living has also had an impact and there are instances where there is only one device in a household and if a parent is working from home and using that device, the student is then unable to access their learning. The Scottish Government has backed away from their device pledge although in any event it had been introduced without due consideration of its workability.

Louise said another factor is Artificial Intelligence in Scottish Education and how that will progress. It is a growing issue and they hope to be in a position to put out information to keep parents advised whilst also discussing the implications with the young people.

Richard thanked Louise and Fiona for their very helpful insights into the circumstances, the causes and the measures being taken. Richard indicated that the Parent Council should be emphasising to the parent body that parents need to engage with the school and recognise that our young people will learn better by being in school.

Louise stressed that there is also the point of contact factor. It can be difficult to check on the health, safety and wellbeing of a young person if they are not in school.

(b) Mobile Phone Usage

Louise reported that implementation of the initiative would begin with an extended US Time with S1 to S3 students but there would be no surprises for the young people given that they have been consulted at every stage in the process, with a large response to the consultations. Louise advised that the policy document was almost finalised and it will be tied into the core values of Mackie so that students can understand the reasoning behind the initiative.

Louise shared the 5 statements relating to what constitutes acceptable use of mobile devices at Mackie. She explained that the statements had been shared with students at US Time and they had been given the opportunity to indicate whether or not they agreed with each statement but any disagreement had to be followed by the reason(s) why they disagreed and an alternative suggested.

There had also been lengthy discussions with staff to devise a workable consequence system, together with consultation with the Council's legal team. It was anticipated that the senior leadership team will be busy initially but they are determined that teaching will not be disrupted. A record will also be kept of non-compliance so that it can be addressed appropriately and an FAQ will be produced for parents. It is anticipated that the Scottish Government and Aberdeenshire Council will also be issuing guidelines.

It is intended to begin the process during the first week of study leave and a session will also be convened with the new S1 pupils when they are in school. Consideration will be given to

organising an online session with parents at some point if it is thought that it would be worthwhile.

Richard observed that it was noticeable that much thought and work had gone into producing the document and it was apparent that a balance had been sought. He emphasised the importance of building a culture whereby mobile device use is not viewed as entirely detrimental but responsible use is encouraged.

(c) Staff Changes

Louise reported on forthcoming changes in several Faculties. In the Faculty of Health, Stuart Axten has been appointed to a Depute Head post at Harlaw Academy and will be leaving Mackie at Easter. His replacement, Ryan Ramsay has been recruited from Inverurie Academy and it is anticipated he will take up the post mid-May. Ryan has experience of both PE and HE which should prove helpful. The PE team has been strengthened, which should also be helpful. In the Faculty of Mathematics and Computing, Iain Macdonald will be out of school on secondment for 3 days per week. Sean Strachan will be acting Head of Faculty, and he is experienced in teaching both disciplines. It is intended to increase the provision of computing studies throughout the BGE in due course.

Suzi Birrell and Carol Meller have been recruited to the Principal Teacher post for Additional Support for Learning (job share) and the role has been confirmed as permanent. Interviews for a Biology post (0.6 of full-time) were scheduled for later that week and 2 further posts had been made permanent.

Changes were also anticipated in RMPS but there is sufficient flexibility in the subject until the best way forward is decided.

5. PARENT COUNCIL BUSINESS

Mandy Tulloch reported that the planned meeting with Jenny Gilruth had been postponed. Two requests for the meeting to be rearranged had subsequently been sent to Ms Gilruth but no reply had so far been received. The Parent Council representatives had met online and had continued to voice their concerns. Mandy said she would provide an update when in a position to do so.

Louise advised that they have tried to retain probationers as much as possible and highlighted the significant fall-out of teachers during their probationer year; indicating that there is a crisis around recruitment and teaching is not being advertised as an attractive career prospect.

6. AOB

Richard requested an update on the Redcloak Co-op incident and Louise advised that the situation had been dealt with very appropriately prior to the ban being lifted. Louise emphasised that the parents of the students involved had been very supportive of the measures taken and Police Officers had handled the situation firmly but sympathetically.

Richard noted that litter continues to be an issue and while obviously not all blame is attributable to Mackie pupils, it could be flagged up to parents that they should remind their young people of the basic expectation to try and make a positive difference wherever possible. Louise agreed that litter generally is a recurring issue.

Louise reminded attendees that the next meeting will be convened in person and recommended that the agenda includes the update on Insight Data on Key Measures which will be easier to share on a large screen.

7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

As already agreed, the next meeting is scheduled for 7 May 2024 and, as mentioned above, it will be convened in person.

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