Minutes of the Classical High School Community Association

Meeting on October 2, 2019

Prepared by John Landry, 10/22/19

Chair Marybel Martinez ran the meeting, with about two dozen parents attending. Secretary John Landry was absent, but another parent took detailed notes.

Most of the meeting consisted of Principal Scott Barr and Assistant Principal Brian Baldizar speaking on a variety of issues:

**Physical plant**

There were several improvements over the summer, most notably the auditorium, which got new seats similar to what’s at Gillette Stadium. The Alumni Association, along with the city, helped to pay for them. Now we can use all 600 seats there. The school also just got a grant from the Champlin Foundation that will help to pay for better lights and sound – while maintaining the room’s excellent acoustics.

Yes, the plumbing in the school is fine – the drinking fountains are tested regularly, most recently this summer, and are well within safe levels. Last year’s rumor of high lead counts was false. Responding to student requests, the school is planning to replace some of the bubblers with water stations that also enable easy fill-up of water bottles.

The third floor of the main building is still too warm on hot days.

**State takeover**

It’s still too early to say much about the state takeover of the city’s public schools. Tell kids to be patient; we’re in uncharted waters. Big changes this school year are unlikely, as Classical is an AP-driven school with the curriculum locked in.

The Johns Hopkins report led to a lot of negative press, and it’s hard to rebound from that. That included criticism of Classical, especially some unhappy students.

The commissioner has talked about spending more money to attract teachers, including trying to get and keep more teachers from Teach for America (many of these teachers leave after a few years). Attracting and retaining qualified teachers is always a challenge, partly because they can go to Massachusetts, where the pension is better. The district has many unfilled positions, especially in math, chemistry and physics. Classical is asking some retired teachers to come back.

What positive things could come from the takeover? There’s a renewed sense of urgency, attention to core values, and thinking about what schooling should look like in the city. Classical has had a lot of success, with a robust student culture, but even Classical could gain from the process. It’s a chance to stop, pause, and reflect. “People rise to a better standard when the heat is on.”

In terms of infrastructure, the administration is pushing for a better cleaning contract, better lighting, and improved HVAC. – the main building still has some stale air.

The takeover should be in place by Thanksgiving, with full state control over the district. The interim superintendent will continue for three more months.

Principal Barr is setting up a monthly coffee in his office for parents to talk about the takeover and any other general concerns (not to talk about issues with a specific class or teacher). Stay tuned for details. You can also follow him on Twitter, @PrincipalBarr.

**Student well-being**

Even before the takeover, the administration had been promoting a campaign of self-care, and that’s continuing. The 1,130 kids bring a variety of issues to school, including depression, anxiety, and bereavement. The school has changed its message over the past few years to be sensitive to these struggles. The tagline on the school home page used to be “Achieving Excellence since 1843.” Now it’s “Be Kind, Be Together, Go Purple.” The principals are telling the kids to see the school as their second home. “Knowing they can get what they need is a big deal for kids.” That includes sensitivity to the large LGBTQ community of students.

Thursday is Positive Sign Day at Classical and some other schools in the state. Principal Barr and others are going around with fun, silly signs telling kids that they matter. The school is also partnering with the Providence Center and Sojourner House, and there’s a strong crisis team in place as needed.

**The work of principals**

Brian Baldizar explained some of what he and the two other assistant principals, Beth Battey and Michael Marino, do on a regular basis. One activity is to lead a grade-level assembly each quarter. These assemblies are partly about teaching certain life skills, and partly to explain how the school works. Classical is a traditional school, by design, with a limited budget, so it can’t allow some things that kids want to do. For example, kids are asking to eat lunch outside. But the school doesn’t have enough of a maintenance staff to keep the outside areas clean, especially with the campus being so open.

Another big effort is developing support for kids so they stay in school. They’re encouraging students to be empathetic and kind when classmates ask for help.

The principals are also supporting restorative work, inside and outside the school – which also helps with the school’s push for community service. They worked with students last month who wanted to leave school to protest inaction on climate change at the statehouse. Instead of a mass walkout that day, the school will facilitate a community service day in the spring where students will both address climate change and give back to their neighborhoods.

**Various issues**

The school’s average SAT scores increased over the previous year.

The administration continues to work at getting kids off their cellphones during the school day. Most classrooms have “device pockets” where students can drop off their phones as they enter, and this system is working well. Sometimes a teacher will tell kids to retrieve their phones for a specific need in the class. The administration is completely forbidding wireless earbuds, partly for safety reasons, but also so kids can better pay attention and be there for each other.

Why the long advisory on Thursdays? What about kids who want to go in late that day? The long advisory is mainly for test prep for PSAT and SAT, not for finishing homework. Each kids has an account with Khan Academy, and those prep courses yield a significant bump on tests.

**Miscellaneous items**

Marybel gave an update on apparel sales, which the parent association will be selling after all. It turned out there were no other school groups selling items with Classical logos. She will send an email with a link for online ordering when that’s ready.

Next month’s meeting will be the second Wednesday, November 13th, 6:30-8pm. Instead of a regular meeting, it will be a parents social at the Wild Colonial on South Main Street (run by Classical parent Maurice Collins). We’ll hold a raffle fundraiser, and we’re looking for a few more raffle items. Teachers and alumni are also invited.

Our next regular meeting is Wednesday, December 4th. We’re hoping to have a principal attend and update us on the takeover.