Minutes of the Classical High School Community Association

Meeting on February 5, 2020

Prepared by John Landry

Chair Marybel Martinez ran the meeting. Secretary John Landry also attended, along with ten other parents. Our guest speaker was Nikki Best, one of the school’s mental health counselors.

**Mental Health Services for Students**

Ms. Best explained how the school supports students’ mental health. For at least a decade, every public high school in the district has had a Student Assistance Counselor. These are trained social workers, paid for by the district. Initially they were part-time and focused on preventing drug addiction, but they have gradually expanded to cover all mental health issues. Now they are full-time at many if not most schools, including Classical.

Ms. Best came to Classical in 2010 as the Student Assistance Counselor. She left in 2016 to work with sex offenders at the ACI, as well as build a private practice, and was succeeded by Nikki Bond. She recently left to work at Roger Williams University, and then by Sabrina Mazzilli, the current counselor.

As mental health crisis needs expanded at Classical (and elsewhere), the school worked with the alumni association to pay for Ms. Best to come on site to run two support groups, one for gender-questioning students, and the other for students who have recently lost a close relative. She started working here again in 2017.

The school gave her an unused room in the basement to run the groups, and also asked her to see private-practice patients there during the school day. The idea was to enable students to see a therapist without relying on parents to drive them to appointments. Ms. Best recently left her work at the ACI and now goes to Classical every day of the week, though she also sees patients in her office on the East Side. She is paid by the alumni association grant, for the support groups, and by student insurance for the one-on-one consultations.

About the same time that Ms. Best returned to Classical, the school district contracted with R. I. Family Service, a nonprofit agency. Classical gained a half-time social worker, Shelby Fofana, and is hoping to add a second half-time social worker from the same agency for the fall. These social workers meet with students one-on-one and take insurance, though like Ms. Best where needed they charge a sliding scale or see students for free. The school district pays for some of the RI Family Service contract.

Altogether, the school now has the equivalent of about three full-time social workers on site. Students typically see Ms. Mazzilli first. Ms. Best said she was “overwhelmed,” and spends much of her time simply assessing whether students are suicidal. She refers most students to the RI Family Service social workers or to Ms. Best, or to Bradley Hospital in dire situations. She also sees some students one-on-one who do not have insurance. We invited her to speak at the meeting along with Ms. Best, but she declined, saying she was too busy.

The school also has a psychologist come by one day a week to advise the mental health team on specific cases. The school is trying to expand that presence so the social workers can respond more promptly to difficult situations. And generally the district is working on expanding mental health care at schools.

Ms. Best said she’d like to add a third support group for students with debilitating f anxiety. She gave the example of a student who had to read a poem in class and froze up. The solution was for the student to read it to Ms. Best and the teacher outside of class, so the student didn’t fall behind. She says a lot of students are more anxious than before.

She echoed what Mr. Toro had said last month, that the kids struggling the most are freshmen and sophomores, not upperclassmen. “Students don’t feel the way they deserve to feel.” She says many kids come to Classical having excelled in middle school without much work, or even really learning how to study. Suddenly they’re just an ordinary student and struggling in classes. School is also more competitive than they’re used to. They’re demoralized, and they start thinking, “I don’t belong here.” She also blamed social media. Finally, many immigrant or first-generation students fear deportation, for themselves or a relative.

Asked what advice she’d give parents, she said: If your kid start behaving strangely or struggling in school, don’t just assume things will work out; talk to them now and deal with issues before they get worse.

For Classical, besides adding more mental health staff, she urges the school to do more to develop the whole kid, not just the academic side.

She’d also like the advisory time to be more than a study hall; it should also help students with life skills, including managing money, interviewing, applying for a job, writing emails. She did say the new rotating schedule is a great improvement, so kids who are often tardy in the morning, or lose energy by late afternoon, aren’t doomed to struggle in a specific class.

In working with kids, she has several key concerns, expressed in the acronym CROWH-HOG. That stands for caring, responsibility, objectivity, willingness to be a little uncomfortable, honesty, humility, open-mindedness, and gratitude.

She wondered if, with three high schools so close together, the district could justify setting up a full-fledged community health center so students could get comprehensive care while they’re at school. Just at Classical, dozens of students visit the school nurse every day.

**Other Issues**

An interesting counterpoint came from a parent who wondered about the workload for students. She has two kids at the school, one with lots of homework, and the other coasting. The latter said, “I’m with the 75%, so back off and let me play videogames” – meaning he/she is not on the intensive academic track, so the lack of homework is no surprise. It seems students are voluntarily tracking themselves, with only a quarter of them taking a lot of AP and honors classes, and the rest of the students are taking the regular courses. Is this 25/75% breakdown true?

Another parent raised the problem of poor instruction from science teachers, especially in Chemistry. She suggested allowing students to learn online. She works at a rural school that can’t afford to provide AP classes in science, so it sets up those students in the library to take an online class for credit. Online has problems, but she thinks Classical students would learn much more from an online class than her kid learned in Chemistry last year. Or perhaps there’s a blended-learning solution. Also, going online may be a solution to the school district’s current difficulty in attracting qualified science teachers. This idea got a lot of support from the parents present, who said they were willing to lobby the school district for a pilot program.

Yet another parent asked about collecting prep books for the SAT and AP courses. She says she has a bunch of books her kids no longer need, and rather than give them to a library, she’d like to give them to Classical. Many students may prefer to prepare online, but it’s worth trying a collection since it’s so easy. The Chsca officers agreed to follow up with the principals on both issues.

Our next meeting is Wednesday, March 4th, at 6:30pm.