Minutes of the Classical High School Community Association

Meeting on January 8, 2020

Prepared by John Landry

Chair Marybel Martinez ran the meeting. Secretary John Landry also attended, along with seven other parents. Our guest speaker was Louis Toro, the school’s longtime head guidance counselor.

**Various Issues**

Marybel said last month’s winter breakfast for teachers went well. Chsca put it together with donations from parents.

Jen DiBiasio, our liaison with the alumni association, said that the alumni are putting together funds for freshening up the staff women’s restrooms, mostly by adding nice toiletries and other touches.

We raised some concerns about the plumbing for the students. While the restrooms are generally in better shape than last year, the water coolers in the cafeteria are still running out at lunchtime. This could be a big problem when the weather turns warm, especially since the new bubblers aren’t likely to come until next year. Chsca will follow up with Mr. Baldizar on this.

Some kids are still having difficulty getting bus passes. We talked about putting together a petition, including parents from other high schools, asking RIPTA to reduce the requirement of living at least two miles from school to get a free pass.

**College Applications**

Mr. Toro spoke at length about the college application process, which has changed a bunch since even three years ago. Applications dates are now a good deal earlier, so now is actually a good time for juniors to start thinking about college. That’s due to three trends: The regular applications are due a bit earlier; pretty much every college now wants them by January 1, not February 1. Early Decision and Early Action has become increasingly popular, and most of these applications are due October 15th. And third, colleges are as competitive as ever, with the average student now applying to more schools than in the past. He cited Boston College, which received close to 50,000 applications last fall (with about 10,000 accepted and 2,500 to be enrolled). The number of American high school graduates is stable or declining, but more and more foreign students want to come here.

One thing that hasn’t really changed is the prominence of the Scholastic Aptitude Test. While many colleges are making it optional for general applications, it’s still required for applying to honors programs and for most scholarships. He strongly recommended that all juniors take the test.

He had a few other recommendations for students. He says to take the SAT twice, ideally in March and then in August or October. Most (not all) colleges let students decide which score to send. He recommends Early Action or Early Decision for at least one college, as these are no longer niche programs -- some colleges fill two-thirds of their entering class this way. But Early Decision, because it involves a contractual commitment to attend, runs the risk of reducing financial aid packages.

The key dates for current juniors are:

February 4: College day, which involves a special assembly during the school day, and an information session that evening for parents

March 25: Free SAT offered at school

April 7: College Fair at the convention center downtown

October 15: Deadline for Early Decision or Early Action at most colleges

January 1: Deadline for regular applications

He advised students to begin thinking about potential colleges and have a rough list by the end of March. Then they can focus on those colleges at the College Fair and get their questions answered by a representative. By June students should have a list of prospects to consider visiting over the summer. By Labor Day they should be pretty settled on their colleges, so they can focus on the application itself. The English Department will offer workshops on essay writing in September.

He said that all the parents of juniors will receive a mailing soon to explain this process. He also explained that the school has some interns from Providence College to help seniors with the application process. Much of the application will happen online, which adds convenience and peace of mind, but also creates new problems. He mentioned that many high schools in the state are using the Naviance website, but the site has had some problems lately due to rapid growth.

**Student Mental Health**

We asked Mr. Toro for an update on the mental health concerns expressed at the October meeting, and he talked about this for a while too. He said the worries have only increased, locally and nationally. At a recent state-wide meeting of school guidance counselors, the two biggest topics were college applications and mental health. Three Classical students were referred to Bradley Hospital in the past month because of suicidal tendencies. In his decades of working in the school, he’s never seen anything like this.

Niki Best, a social worker specializing in student mental health, continues to be at the school three days a week, thanks in part to the alumni association. There’s also a Student Assistance Counselor every day at school; that was Nikki Bond, but she just left, and her replacement is Sabrina Mazzilli. The school also has a psychologist to make diagnoses, but only one day a week; the school is trying to increase that. Beyond the school there’s Kids Link, a hotline for kids in emotional crisis run by Lifespan, but it’s often overloaded.

We asked what’s driving this increase in anxiety and depression. He thinks the biggest factor is smartphones and social media, which has increased bullying and other problems. We wondered about pressure with college, but he said that’s probably a minor issue. The kids having the most trouble are 9th and 10th graders, coming out of middle school. The kids going through the college process may be struggling too, but apparently not as much.

Besides hiring more mental health specialists, the school is trying out programs to give kids an outlet for difficult emotions. There’s yoga every Thursday, and students can go walk around the athletic track as needed.

Our next meeting is Wednesday February 5th at 6:30pm.