

Madras College Parent Council

Wednesday 11 May, 2011 - DRAFT MINUTES

1. Chairman's opening remarks

The chairman welcomed all those attending and noted that some members would be delayed.

2. Present- John Barnett, Ian Jones, Dawn Waddell, Charlotte Kirby, Rebecca Trengove, Jayne Fraser, Phill Williams, Alex Slawin, Jackie Himpson, Cllr Tim Brett, Cllr Ron Caird, Cllr Robin Waterston, Linda Hardie, Callum McLeod, David Rickman, Andy Primmer, Jane Pettegree, Hugh Watson, Henry Paul, Andy Herd, Paul Brown, Dave Cummings, Bruce Sinclair

Apologies – Henry Paul and Bruce Sinclair for late arrivals. Emma Henderson, Karen Barnett, Lynsey Seeley, Cllr Dorothea Morrison. John McAnaw sends his apologies and has also resigned

3. Minutes of previous meetings of 9 March & 21 April 2011 (both on web site)

Minutes approved without need for any corrections.

4. Matters arising

- *Correspondence with Ken Greer on managing school budgets* - The Chairman had written to Ken Greer and received a reply which was circulated. A Fife Council Official will attend a future meeting to explain about devolved school budgets.

5. Chairman's Report – John Barnett

A letter had been received from Loches Alliance in France seeking an exchange arrangement. The Rector commented that the School received many more such approaches than it could possibly accommodate. The Chairman will reply.

6. Treasurer's Report – Dawn Waddell

A donation of £34.04 earned from cake and candy sales has been received from the Hockey club. When added to the unspent balance of their £120 grant from the PC, this provided enough funds for the purchase of a second hockey body armour. The purchase has been made and the kit will be handed to Mrs Methven in the next week or so. The PC currently has a credit balance of £1535.18.

7. Secretary/Webmaster's Report

All local Councillors now on meeting circulation list. Updates being made to web site as needed.

8. Fundraising Group Report –Debbie Cumming

- *50/50 club and 2011 Lawn Event*

a planning meeting for an all day lawn event to take place on the South Street site had taken place. The committee had set itself the target of raising £20,000

9. Rector's Report – Ian Jones

The intake for next year stands at 195-8 which will result in the budget and staffing levels being squeezed due to the staffing formula. Eight members of staff are currently considering retirement

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including two Deputes. 1 permanent depute will be appointed and a second on a temporary 23 month contract. The committee was reminded that one current depute position exists because of the new building project, and a second because of the current split site arrangements.

Action: committee members were asked to express interest in taking part on the interview panel.

- The photographic and text project “ A Year in the Life of Madras College” by Lorne McIntyre and Peter Adamson is proceeding exceptionally well and will result in a product to be sold at commercial prices. This is a unique project and strenuous efforts are being made to achieve a full representation of school activities.
- The diary is being prepared for next year. The AGM of the Parent Council will take place on 14th September. Members expressed a desire to continue with the current pattern of meetings.
- The Eco Club has won a second flag
- Curriculum for Excellence. There have been two training sessions for staff which have resulted in establishing principles and a skeleton structure for the senior years up to S5
Cllr Waterstone asked to what extent further guidance information or decisions were still awaited. The Rector replied that it was a journey of faith and that not all detail was yet in place. A particular example concerned bi-level teaching of levels 4 and 5 in Technology and Chemistry. The Chair queried the phrase a journey of faith, to which the Rector replied that to the end of S3 the structure and detail of the curriculum was clear. A parent asked why, if that was the case, did three separate teachers say at the S1 Parents’ evening that they did not know the curriculum for their subjects in S2 and S3? The Rector replied that they should know and that all teachers are members of curriculum groups which are working on these issues.
- The Chairman asked about whether Highers and Advanced Highers would be affected and queried whether Highers could continue as the “gold standard” if the Scottish four year degree model became a three year one.
- Most of the budgets for this financial year have now been set. There are to be some substantial cuts. The CPD budget is cut by £5k. The general maintenance budget in the School is cut from £16.381k to £10.759k. Roofs lifting off would be on a separate bid. Did the Council not promise that current buildings would be maintained to be fit for purpose? Supplies and services budget is cut by £3.5k. The A-allocation for departments in the School is cut by £3k due to School role reduction. There has been work done in the last 90 days on how to reshape support services, as there is a requirement to save £117k from support staff, ie there will be fewer office staff and technicians in the future. Now waiting to hear consequences on transfers of staff. Four are taking early retirement. Virement can happen between budgets, but all budgets are tight. Robin - Print08 charging practices being reviewed. Repairs budget reduction not a decision of councillors, but part of general Council budget issues. Fife Council has to look at value for money and closed shop deals cannot continue. 15 schools in Fife were chosen for new bike racks, why not Madras? Perhaps due to the current buildings not being expected to be used for many more years? Are we being selectively chosen not to get things? Cllr Caird – but will fabric not suffer even more if new school schedule slips even further? Cllr Brett - Education and Social service took lower reduction in budgets than other parts of Fife. Has to be passed on to schools. Chair – happy that all councillors here agree that the optimum outcome is to progress to new school building as soon as possible.

10. Course Choices

One parent had asked how the School would most like to see parents getting more involved in a

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partnership with the School. The Chairman commented that this group should return to that important question at another meeting. For discussion at this meeting was a paper prepared by Paul Brown, as attached at the end of these minutes, and the contents of this were summarised at the meeting by Paul. The chairman noted that the Rector is open to discuss all academic and other matters and welcomed opportunities to respond. The School's senior management group wishes to encourage active parental involvement. Another member of the Parent Council backed up Paul's comments, stating that he would prefer a longer time between a parents' evening and the deadline for course choice forms to be in. He commented this has been raised before. Another member of the Parent Council commented that similar things applied in S1 this year also, perhaps more, as parents have had by then a more limited experience of school, and choice were made before any parent evening. The Rector thanked Paul for the paper, which he thought was constructive. The School knew that this year was to be difficult as there was a S2-3 choice for the last time as well as an S1 choice happening. Difficulties were compounded by members of staff being absent. A group of staff meets next week to look at the whole reporting and cycle of parent nights and where course choice fits in. The Rector acknowledged the need for more time between parent night and choice of courses deadline. He asked if he could take this letter to that group. Paul and the Parent Council were happy to see this happen.

Another member of the Parent Council commented that it would be useful for parents to have easy access to a document that gave general information on what is Int2, grade 1, etc. The Rector said he would be happy for one of his team to generate such a document and put it up on the School website. The School is to put out an email to S1 parents asking for comments on the new S1 choice etc experience, probably via Survey Monkey. Cllr Brett asked about Paul's point 3 – Paul states parental partnership important, but this was not obvious in the forms. In Social Education teachers talk with pupils about course choices, so that pupils can go home with information to discuss with parents.

The Rector has highlighted that parents should write directly to Rector with any issues, and he will get them dealt with in an appropriate and timely manner.

11. Maintenance of existing school buildings

Are we getting best value for painting, repairing toilets, etc? Large amounts of budgets are devolved to schools. We should have a Council official in to speak to us about this in due course. All maintenance indicated in last meeting is either being done or in progress. Print08 – probably cannot opt out. Rector concerned about poor quality printing of school prospectus. Cllr Waterston pleased to hear that an officer is to be invited. Robin and other councillors have been pressing for better system. This should be a focus point in a future meeting.

12. New school building – update on negotiations and timetable

Negotiations continue positively at a high level. According to detailed briefing last week key and critical issues are being addressed. The Parent Council Chairman has had a confidential briefing on various matters. A large majority of people in the consultation in both St Andrews and Bridgehead areas supported the new build school on the North Haugh site. Negotiations have to conclude within two weeks for that to be finalised legally in order to go to Fife Council's Policy, Finance and

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Asset Management Committee on 16 June. This should be the meeting to make the critical decision. Some indications are positive. No update. Rector suggests a meeting of a combination of the Development Group and Parent Council after 16 June. If the go-ahead is given there, then the next hurdle will be the planning process.

At last meeting two planning issues noted. NE Fife planning committee has thrown out Knightsbridge application due to no master plan. If Fife council puts in the School plans, does it need a masterplan for that area as well? The relevant land owners with the Council may need to get together to develop a masterplan.

13. Academic collaboration with University

The Rector distributed a paper regarding email responses from different Principal Teachers about current things happening. Lunchtime meeting recently in University looking at senior phases of CfE – was a good and useful meeting. Rector had seen collaboration in North Carolina and seen good and less good points. Current paper shows strong collaborative work locally at the moment. Rector at another meeting with North Carolina next week. Query on Scott Bacc. Is happening currently here. Cllr Brett- is there a longer term plan on academic collaborations? Senior staff from both institutions meet at least twice yearly to guide links. Lots of benefits here for high achievers, but what about for others? PT support for learning has made links with University Student support. RSE Saturday low uptake, where is communication problem?

14. Forthcoming events

Lawn event. 16 or 23 June next year? Stage with performers from school. Barbecue. Various things. An all day event. Chair contacted SPTA re risk assessment and insurance. Thanks to Debbie for leading effort. Any person wishing to join group please contact Debbie.

23 May parent evening.

New timetable begins 8 June.

Sports day now Wed 22 June.

Summer concert 29 June.

15. Date of next meeting and possible extra meeting post 16 June 2011 –

South St library on Tuesday 21 June, 6.30

16. AOCB

Thanks to all involved in last evening concert, was great.

The School is supporting kit for rugby team. Senior hockey girls looking for local sponsorship. Rugby team suggested to ask for a bag-pack to fund better kit.

Congrats to Madras groups who were at the wedding breakfast.

Congrats on Green Flag renewal.

The paper Prepared by Parent Council Member Paul Brown follows.

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Madras arrangements for Course Choices for S3/S4 pupils

As a parent of an S2 pupil, I have recent experience of the arrangements for course choices and, from talking to other parents, I'm aware that this year's arrangements were not substantially different from those of previous years. I'm also aware that this is the last year of pre Curriculum for Excellence arrangements but, in what follows, I am highlighting some general principles which I believe are important in order to involve parents as effectively and helpfully as possible. By way of context for my own familiarity with some of the underlying issues, apart from being a parent I have also taught for 10 years in comprehensive schools in England (which included two years as Head of Sixth form) and I have worked in careers guidance for nearly 20 years, 12 of these at Oxford University and 6 here in St Andrews.

Direct communication to parents about the course choices this year, comprised the following:

1. The Guide book, which was sent home via sons or daughters on Friday 11th February.
2. A Parents' Evening to discuss both school reports and course choices on Monday 14th February
3. A request that we should sign off choices on the appropriate form and return by Tuesday 15th February

In addition, the School's guidance teachers had been working with pupils on these issues for the week preceding the Parents' Evening and we had sight of the sheets which our son had worked on. I was also told, on enquiry at the Parents' evening, that the booklets had been delayed in printing and should have been distributed earlier but there was no general notification to all parents about this.

Issues arising from these arrangements

This is the first occasion in their secondary education when pupils have to make significant subject choices, and as such, it's an excellent opportunity to focus on the aptitudes and future possibilities which these choices should reflect. It is also a wonderful opportunity for teachers and parents to focus together on achieving the best outcomes for our youngsters. I do not think the current arrangements capitalise on these opportunities.

Specific concerns:

1. **Inadequate information.** Many parents at Madras are not Scottish, and even those who are Scottish may not fully understand the examination system and the place of Standard Grades within the wider examination system and how choices now affect later options. There was no general information session on the evening, so any broader questions had to be asked within the (short) individual subject consultations
2. **Timing.** There was very little time for parents to absorb the content of the booklet and even less to factor in the implications of discussions with subject teachers before the deadline the following morning at 9am to return the signed off choices sheet. Sound decisions require adequate time for reflection and sufficient information.
3. **Parental partnership.** The completed course choices form has to be signed off by a parent or carer, a formal recognition that parents are (legally?) required to be involved in this process. However, the accompanying Rector's letter, although addressed to "parent/carer"

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only refers to helping “pupils make the choices which best suit them as individuals” and at no point explicitly identifies a role for parents in the process.

- 4. Positive goals and aspiration.** I am concerned that while there are many comments in the documentation about constraints of different kinds and the dangers arising from a lack of realism, there are very few which encourage aspiration and a positive view of pupils’ potential which will be realised through the courses which they are choosing. I recognise that this is a document for all parents, and that circumstances vary greatly, but I think there are many (I hope most) parents/carers and children for whom the tenor of these messages is insufficiently positive. This process is a golden opportunity to express optimism, enthusiasm and ambition.

Recommendations

1. Either a dedicated information event on an evening preceding the Parents’ Evening or a session at the beginning of that Evening which explains the wider context of the Scottish qualifications system.
2. Sufficient time between the Parents Evening and the return of choices forms; I would suggest at least a fortnight.
3. A clear description of the positive role which parents/carers can play in the process and clear encouragement and welcoming of parental involvement.
4. Positivity. Communication about existing levels of achievement in the School and an expressed institutional desire to improve on them still further. Encouraging pupils and parents/carers to view these choices as a significant step towards planning for their futures with appropriate confidence.

Paul Brown May 2011