

Peirce School
Strive to shine: as a student, as a friend

PTO Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, December 3, 2014

- 1. Co-Presidents' Greeting – Cris Martin and Angela Snyder**
 - a. Introduction of PTO Board, Teacher Representative, Committee Chairs, and other attendees.**

 - b. Recap of last month and thank you to volunteers**
 - i. Lantern Walk
 - ii. Craft Fair – We came in close to budget. The pies sold out very quickly. Tickets for the iPad Mini and 50/50 Raffle are still on sale through Friday.
 - iii. Turkey Drive – Ask Lori how we did.

- 2. Principal's Remarks – Karen Hartley**

Karen passed the floor to Jud Pierce.

3. Special Guest – Jud Pierce, School Committee Representative

Jud has been on the School Committee since 2012. The committee has seven members, each serving a three year term. They meet every other Thursday night. Check the School Calendar on the Arlington Public Schools website for dates: <http://www.arlington.k12.ma.us/calendar/>.

The School Committee is in the process of putting together a budget for next year. (The Budget Calendar is also on the APS website: <http://www.arlington.k12.ma.us/administration/budget/>.) The elementary school principals attended the last School Committee meeting and presented their priorities for the coming year. Karen spoke on behalf of the elementary principals, asking for more personnel, in particular, literacy coaches and more teaching assistants. Teaching assistants are not highly paid and yet they are extremely important in keeping a classroom running. It's especially important to have full time TAs in kindergarten.

Jud said it's remarkable how the principals tend to agree on their priorities: more professional development, full time social workers and literacy coaches in each elementary school, etc. The improvement in Peirce math MCAS scores and student growth percentiles shows that the coaching program has been a huge help. At one point we had literacy coaches, but we had to give them up in exchange for other things. Karen: We never want to give anything up! Each of the elementary principals used to compile his/her own "wish list." It was the School Committee that recommended they coordinate their requests.

Jud: The School Committee hears from the elementary, middle and high school principals as well as Special Education. By February, they submit a budget to the Finance Committee at Town Meeting, and then Town Meeting votes on it. Since the 2011 budget override, we assume a 3.5% increase each year, and 7% for special education. But we've had an unexpected influx of students; 240 students at the elementary level alone moved into Arlington last year. Jud would like to see the creation of an enrollment formula so that the budget increases automatically with enrollment. Deval

Patrick, lame duck governor, is declaring a deficit and asking for cuts. This could hurt the schools, the METCO program, or circuit breaker funding for special education. Cuts are not what we need right now, especially with the pressure of implementing a new curriculum and evaluation system. Unfunded mandates get pushed on the school districts. We really need professional development time. Nevertheless, the schools in Arlington are doing amazing work in every area.

Parents worry a lot about Ottoson Middle School. Middle school enrollment has increased. Class sizes were heading towards 30, so they added a cluster to the sixth grade this year to address that problem. (A cluster is a group of kids who share the same teachers and classrooms.) Jud's oldest kid is heading to Ottoson next year. He says he too has felt some trepidation, but the more he learns about what's going on at Ottoson, the better he feels about it. In particular, the staff is wonderful. The art and music programs are great. It is common, in other towns too, that parents worry about middle school and pull their kids out of the public schools then, perhaps returning for high school. Jenny Borovac: Ottoson ranks lower than the elementary schools on assessments – this is a concern. Also, she's heard some Ottoson parents say that the first year was great, but they were disappointed with the second year. What is being done to try to improve Ottoson? What about science and computer science?

Jud says that Laura Chesson and others are making efforts to increase technology at all levels. The elementary wish list also has requests related to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). There is a Facilities Subcommittee, led by Jeff Thielman, on the School Committee; they will be tackling the Ottoson space issue. There has been some talk of blowing out one side of the building to expand. However we've already requested a renovation of the high school. The middle school is a much newer building, and we can't do both at the same time. They may bring in some portables or trailers to expand the space for now. We are expecting enrollment of 1200 in next few years, and the space is only built for 1100.

Jocelyn's daughter just finished middle school. She said she had lots of concerns about her daughter's experience at Ottoson's SLC (Special Learning Center). She found there were extensive behavioral problems, including bullying, which interfered with learning. She also said the staff is wonderful, though she had some concerns about the administration.

Jud says that Kathleen Lockyer had been acting as Interim Director of Special Education for several years. The new, permanent director is Alison Elmer, who is extremely committed. Math scores in sixth and seventh grade have shown a need for more growth, and Matt Coleman, Mathematics Director, is targeting that issue too.

Jenny: What steps have been taken to improve Ottoson over the past two years? Jud attended an AEF fundraiser last Monday, and there was a big emphasis on technological improvements and STEM. There is lots of good work happening in a very cramped facility. The focus is on technology, math, and improving quality of life outside of classroom with extra activities such as orchestra, etc. All these things are improving, with the help of parents too.

Jocelyn: Moving from small, cozy Peirce to Ottoson is tough on kids. Their experience also largely depends on which cluster they wind up in.

Jud asks, would we be better with a junior high model, where elementary covers K-6, and junior high covers 7-8? Or would we be better with a four-school model that includes both a middle and a junior high? Jocelyn suggests simply adding a second middle school. It also might help if, in fourth

and fifth grades, the kids started learning how to move from class to class. They used to do this at Bishop. Karen taught math there and liked it. But she says that now, with block scheduling and teacher assessments, moving from class to class for subjects at the elementary level is discouraged. Assessments are tied to teacher evaluation, and when the kids move around, it's hard to identify which teacher is having which effect. Data is informing instruction now. Jocelyn wonders how those Bishop kids did in sixth grade, relative to the other elementary schools.

Dan Gillis: What are we doing for technology here at Peirce and more broadly? Logic Programming is a key skill, as well as where the jobs are going to be.

Jud says that the new Thompson School has an iPad for each student, and there are iPad carts in many of the other schools. The old computer room model is no longer effective.

Karen adds that Peirce has one cart per grade level: one iPad for every two students. Also, the Common Core has a lot to say about what kids should be receiving. It wants to educate kids about technology, what the internet is, how to navigate it, how to evaluate the accuracy and morality of what you find there – responsible, critical, ethical use of the internet, and issues of cyberbullying too. The problem is, who is going to teach it all? The curriculum is already packed. There's no plan in place yet for tech learning. When is the classroom teacher going to do it? How are we to integrate it with the rest of the curriculum?

MCAS will be online soon, and there's been some talk of teaching keyboarding in 3rd grade. (Much earlier than that and their hands are too small.) Again, how would this happen? There has been conflicting data about whether kids really need keyboarding, whether they make do just as well on their own. Nevertheless, we should give them something, maybe just a six-week course during library, so at least they know there are proper keyboarding techniques.

Dan: Besides internet savvy and keyboarding, there are still the important areas of logic and programming.

Colleen says that many teachers are still afraid to use the iPads. Whatever we decide to teach, the teachers need adequate training.

Jenny loves that the third graders are doing Kidblog. We have chess – why can't we take the time to teach them Scratch, for example? Dan: Code.org has lessons for first graders; Lightbot video game teaches programming. Angela: For every added technology, we need teacher training to go with it. Jenny: There are many parents with computer science backgrounds. Could they find a way to help the teachers? Maybe just once a year, and the PTO could facilitate? Perhaps we need a Tech Chair on the PTO. Angela: Parents shouldn't have to do that. As a district, more is needed. Jocelyn: How receptive would teachers be to parents helping out? Colleen: The teachers definitely want training; the question is when, especially with their young families. Summer workshops maybe?

Jud is on the negotiations team for the new teachers' contract. Time during the day is an issue. How do we find time for extra training and professional development? One option at the elementary level is a regular early release day every Tuesday, with one of the other school days being longer to make up for it. Other districts have similar plans, and many feel that if it's a regular, weekly thing, it will work better than our current arrangement where the early release days seem to pop up randomly. If

we did have a regular professional development time, we could target part of it for technology training.

Colleen: Ideally, we'd have a technology teacher who's not a classroom teacher or a tech coach.

Angela, two final points: First, the new head of the math department, Matt Coleman, wants to bring computer science back to Ottoson. He is very invested, and we should reach out to him with any concerns or questions. Second, on the AEF website, you can read about two recent grants to Ottoson addressing specific improvements. These are not necessarily glamorous improvements, but training teachers and changing the culture has to come before we see great improvements in our kids' technology education.

Jud says feel free to e-mail or call him – his information is on the School Committee webpage (<http://www.arlingtonma.gov/town-governance/all-boards-and-committees/school-committee>). Follow the calendars; check out our meetings (in person or televised). Budget submissions will be available online soon too.

4. Committee Updates

a. Teacher Representative – Colleen Lloyd

Nothing new from the teachers except the kindergarten playground grant proposal, discussed under New Business.

b. Fundraising – Molly Gillis

We've raised \$5719 so far, and \$500 more should be coming in soon, so we're about \$3000 over our goal. Molly's first letter soliciting donations brought in a number of smaller gifts; the second letter brought in two large gifts. She plans to send out a third letter before the end of the year.

c. Volunteer Coordinator --- Emily Almas

Emily was not present, however she had two questions regarding the list of volunteer opportunities that she has created for the Peirce website. First, under "Current Volunteer Opportunities," she has listed our next three events with the SignUpGenius links. She wonders whether three is enough or should she add more?

To find the list of volunteer opportunities, go to the "Groups" pull-down menu at the top of the page, then "PTO," then "Volunteer." One suggestion is to make this page more easily accessible.

Emily's second question: For each event, she has listed a contact person and the PTO e-mail address. Would anyone object to having a live link to each contact person's e-mail instead?
Angela: This would be more convenient than using the PTO address and make it easier for volunteers, but we'd have to check with each individual before posting his/her address.

d. Enrichment – Jocelyn Willett and Sherri Bulmer

The committee is looking for feedback on the recent puppet show and other enrichment programs. What is the best way to solicit this feedback? SurveyMonkey only allows you to do a certain number of surveys for free. For now, the committee is putting paper surveys in the teachers' mailboxes, rather than e-mailing.

Jocelyn says they are moving away from all-school programs such as the puppet show, and instead trying to schedule more individual workshops for specific grades. The all-school programs are less focused and don't target the curriculum as well. They are also extremely hard to schedule with the new block scheduling, without some kids missing a special.

Everyone seemed to have liked the puppet show, however Colleen notes that it was a bit too long for the little kids.

Suggestions:

- An online survey is probably easier for the teachers, and less likely to get lost than a paper form. Perhaps the PTO could pay for SurveyMonkey, but Google also has templates you can use to create a survey, and it is very user friendly, and free. Dan Gillis offered to help out.
- To encourage teachers to reply to the committee's requests for feedback, the PTO might offer an incentive: say, with 100% participation, we will do something for the teachers. Karen and Colleen can send reminders, too.

5. Budget Update – Lori Pescatore, Treasurer

Lori was not present. Another question for her: what is the "Unassociated" expense listed in the budget?

6. New Business/Proposals

a. Kindergarten Playground: \$3000 PTO Grant Request to begin design

Copies were passed out of Colleen Lloyd's application for an Arlington Education Foundation grant to revamp the kindergarten playground. Enrollment has grown at Peirce, and the Arlington Public Schools employee childcare program also uses the playground now. There can be 50+ kids on the playground at one time, and the space/layout can no longer accommodate them. They have to wait in line to use the single slide, the two swings, and the monkey bars. They get hurt on hill, and nothing grows there as it gets trampled, so it's very dirty. They have to sit on the concrete or dirt to eat their snack. Several attempts have been made in the past to improve the playground, but the problems remain. Colleen would like to see some picnic tables or other seating options, as well as the addition of music or art-related equipment. (The current play structures would remain.) The additional equipment might include bongos, a xylophone, chimes, and an art wall or mural-sized chalkboard. These would give the kids more options during recess, and aid in the development of sensory/fine motor skills too.

Project goals:

1. Provide a safer, more engaging play space for the kindergartners and the community.
2. Allow the kindergartners to make the best use of their limited outdoor recess time: less waiting, more sensory/gross/fine motor experience, fewer behavioral problems.
3. Provide an outdoor teaching space that can be used with Tools of the Mind curriculum for kinesthetic learning (learning through physical activities) and lessons in self-regulation and sensory integration. If some classroom learning can occur in the new space, this could give kids more time outdoors in addition to recess. The older grades and the childcare program could also benefit from the new space.

Karen, Colleen, and Angela recently met with playground architect Diane Miller, who would be a candidate for the design of the playground. Diane Miller also has a Master's degree in

Education, and she chaired the committee in charge of renovating Joey's Park at Winn Brook School in Belmont. Copies of her proposal were passed out. She said she could speak at a community meeting.

Next steps:

1. Begin design of the playground.
2. Hold committee meetings.
3. Fundraising:
 - Arlington Education Foundation Innovations in Education Grant
 - Arlington's new Community Preservation Act has money available for playgrounds/recreation. Diane Miller has experience with CPA grant writing.
 - We could set up a fundraising website with a PayPal link, so parents can easily donate and then forward the information on to their neighbors. This is a true community playground – many families whose kids are still too young for Peirce use it. Fliers posted around the neighborhood could also inform neighbors and direct them to the website.
 - Kickstarter is another option. We could offer incentives for donors – Peirce Pride t-shirts and window decals.
 - We could also get corporate sponsors, e.g., local banks.

Angela says that AEF will want to see a budget before approving the grant application. Once the design phase is underway, we can develop a budget and get other fundraising initiatives in place. This is where the PTO can step in: Do we want to fund the design of the playground? See Diane Miller's proposal: The first phase might run \$1500. Phase 1 and 2 may be all we need, given the size of our project. \$3000 should be more than enough to cover both phases. After that, we have landscape architects and contractors among our parents, so we could do a community build, or bring someone in to do it.

We will need a steering committee to make decisions as the project moves along.

Question: Should we also budget for maintenance of the new space after it's built? E.g., how durable is an outdoor chalkboard?

Karen: Every step will have to be approved by the town. It will be their responsibility to care for the space, snow-blow, shovel, etc.

Question: Could some of the wasted space by the front circle be incorporated into the new design, or some of the fenced-off, weed-covered area by the transformer?

We will also want to take care with the contract, so we know for sure that the architect will complete the work in the allotted time, and that we will own the design at that point.

Those present voted in favor of the PTO investing \$3000 for the purpose of creating a design and budget for the playground project. (Diane Miller would be a design candidate.)

Note: Lori Pescatore was not present, but later voiced objections to the PTO paying out \$3000 without first getting the input of the wider Peirce community.

b. “The Talk” presentation by Dr. Nora Shine

Kindergarten parent and psychologist Nora Shine has offered to present a two-hour talk for parents on the topic of sexual abuse, possibly sometime in March 2015. Expenses would include the cost of having the building open and paying a custodian. We might be able to coordinate with Thompson School.

c. Arlington METCO Family and Friends Skating Night

This event, organized by a Bishop parent, is scheduled for January 10 from 6:00 to 8:00 PM. The Bishop PTO is covering costs. We might help out too. The rink will be offering free skate rentals. We’ll add this event to the calendar once it’s finalized.

d. Help/support needed for upcoming events?

The Talent Show is our next big event. A few parents have already expressed interest in volunteering. Ask Lori what she needs.

Upcoming Dates:

Thursday 12/4	2:00-7:00 PM	Shop at Firefly Moon
Friday 12/5	10:00 AM-8:00 PM	Shop at Coyote Impressions
Friday 12/5		Pajama Drive ends
Friday 12/19	2:30-3:30 PM	Cookie Decorating
Wednesday 1/7	6:30 PM	PTO Meeting
Friday 1/9		Coat Drive ends