

# MINUTES

## St Thomas of Aquin's Special General Parent Council Meeting

26<sup>th</sup> April 2016

### PRESENT:

Jo Kennedy (JK) – Acting Chair  
Dee Armstrong (DA) - Secretary

### Staff:

Peigi Macarthur (PMc) – Supporting Headteacher  
Christopher Santini – Depute Headteacher  
Isabelle Jean Pierre (IJP) – Acting Depute Headteacher  
Sandra Murray (SM) – Teacher Rep  
Lucy Lukacz (LL) - Drama Teacher and EIS Union Representative  
Clare Kelly (CK) – Guidance Teacher

### Parents

Kors Allan, Steven Begg, Christina Bhachu, James Boardman (JB), Fiona Bradley (FB), Stuart Brown, Karen Brownlee, Kitty Bruce Gardyne, Gaye Cleary, Patricia Dolan, Natasha Durkin, Smeera Farooq, Dominic Fergus-Allen, Austin Flynn, Tom Freeman, John Gordon, Catherine Gray, Michael Gray, Caroline Hall, George Harte, Fiona Holmes, Cheryl Hynd, Clare Keenan, Maire Kilgallon, Jason King, Mark Lazarowicz, Nancy Little, Toni Lizier, Jill Lynn, John Macfie, Andrea Manning, Grant McCall, Callum Mccrone, Colleen Mccrone, Catherine Midgley, Jonathan Midgley, Anna Miele, Janet Morrison, Eugene Mullan, Neil Munro, Edele Murphy, Lesley Nangle, Naomi Neilson, Margaret O'Connor, Yvonne Pryor, Christine Rigouleau, Montserrat Santandreu, Cluny Sheeler (CSh), Denise Simpson, Julie Slater, Mary Stevenson, Joanne Thin, Maria Ullibarri, Diane Watters, Angela Wilson

### Apologies

Fr Peter Scally, Deirdre Fitzpatrick, Caroline Johnston, Stephanie O'Donohoe, Steve Maher, (STA Union Representative), Juliet Harkin, Brenda-Anne McLauchlan, Simon Armstrong, Mary Nicolson, Shona O'Brien, Janie Baines

JK welcomed everyone and introduced herself as the Acting Chair for the meeting and DA as the new Secretary, appointed at the last PC meeting. JK explained that this special general meeting had been called after the last PC meeting because it was felt that parents needed to meet more regularly as there were a lot of concerns about what is happening in the school.

### Improvement Agenda

PMc explained her role. She has been appointed by the City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) as a support to the Headteacher in addressing issues of concern and to put together an Action Plan to help the school move forward. (note: this Action Plan is separate from and additional to the School Improvement Plan, which is the annual strategic plan all schools put together and work from)

PMc said that the CECED had asked her to involve herself in the school community. She was getting to know the staff and the school, was being present, attending meetings and reviewing

policy and practice. PMc said that she had increased her hours from 1 day a week to about 18 hours a week to support the SMT in TH's absence. She said that she hoped to be able to offer advice, work on an Action Plan, help to heal relationships and calm the school helping it to move forward. She commented that it was important to focus on some of the positives and said that the school was full of lovely young people and excellent teachers and that there was lots going on and plenty of extra-curricular activity. She explained that Christopher Santini (CS) and Isabelle Jean Pierre (IJP) were running the school at the moment and that she was working with the CECED to get some more senior support into the school.

Staff, parents and pupils will be involved in putting together the Action Plan.

The SMT will be responsible for implementing the Action Plan. PMc will also be part of this process but she does not know how long she will remain at the school.

The Headteacher is currently off sick but the Action Plan process is going ahead in his absence and he will be expected to abide by it even if he is unable to be part of drawing it up.

### **Particular issues of concern**

Strong views were expressed by many parents who have concerns about the performance and practice of the Headteacher in particular. The Parent Council is collecting both positive and negative comments about practice in the school to feedback to the Council. A parent asked how many teachers had contributed to a dossier of concerns that had been collated in late 2015 – the Parent Council understands that a significant number of teaching staff had done so.

PMc responded saying that the CECED were in regular discussion with TH and that they were keen to address matters that had been raised and move forward. She commented that the turnover of previous headteachers had been unsettling but there was a need to change to address current concerns. She pointed out that the CEC have a duty to support the Headteacher and that they had offered that support through her appointment as Supporting Headteacher. She said that the CEC will monitor the impact of that support and noted that the CEC was not dealing with a disciplinary or grievance situation.

Several parents expressed frustrated that a representative of CEC was not at the meeting, PMc responded by saying that she was that representative.

Several parents asked what the issues actually were? PMc said that she had not yet had the chance to meet with all staff and that she also needed to meet with some parents. The issues were multi-layered, she said – some have arisen from current practice, that SMT turnover had been upsetting, that the budget deficit had been challenging and that there were lots of issues relating to the consultation and process of implementing a new curriculum. She said that the process should have been more consultative and that there should have been a more considered response to the difficulties that parents brought as a result. Parents commented that previous SMT turnover should not be blamed for the school's difficulties because the school had had a good reputation and that the staff and pupils were happy.

PMc said that there were significant communication problems in the school and that better communication with parents was needed. She said that staff needed a bigger presence from the Headteacher and that working on consultation and collegiality was important. The school

needed to work on a shared vision and there needed to be a rigour to improvement planning. PMc said that there needed to be wider involvement in decision making, that there were some relationship issues across the staff, that pupils needed a voice, that discipline was good, but that more work needed to be done on promoting positive relationships. She commented that a lot of issues would be common to other schools also, but that they had come to the surface in recent weeks. PMc said that for some people there was too narrow a view of Catholicism in the school and there were issues for parents related to the Catholic ethos. Parents asked about the frequency of staff meetings and were told that there had not been as many full staff meetings or Curriculum Leader meetings recently as there should have been and that this needed to improve.

## **Staffing**

Parents had expressed concerns about a number of key vacancies at the school. Posts are currently being advertised and the aim is to have a full staff complement by August. IJP is Acting Deputy Head and her previous post is now being backfilled.

## **Curriculum**

JK invited James Boardman (JB) to speak to this item first. JB prefaced his remarks by taking the opportunity to say thank you to the passionate and committed staff of the school and to say thank you to Peigi Macarthur for her support.

JB said that three months ago the S1 parents had been presented with a new curriculum, which they were given very little time to digest - concerns about it were raised with various different people to no avail. He said that the new curriculum reduced choice, eroding the Curriculum for Excellence principle of 'personalisation and choice'. He said that subjects appeared not to be grouped logically and that this would lead to a lack of development with children becoming less competitive than their peers from other schools. JB said that the impossibility of a dialogue with the SMT meant that parents were left with many questions.

PMc replied that mistakes had been made in the process, consultation and implementation of the new curriculum rather than in the policy and planning underpinning it. She said that the underlying plan to improve the broad general education was an excellent one. PMc said that the model that was proposed would get a very positive rating from HMIE. However, she said, the change had not been properly discussed with staff or parents and had not been sold well and it needed to be modified to take into account individual pupil preferences.

S2: all 29 pupils who expressed dissatisfaction with their subject choices have now had these adjusted as far as possible. In particular those who wanted to do 3 sciences now have that option. Those who wanted to do 2 social sciences also now have that option.

Parents expressed concern that those pupils who did what they were asked instead of expressing their dissatisfaction may not have chosen the subjects they want, and will need to be consulted again.

It will be possible for pupils to study 3 sciences in S5 but that it will also be possible for a pupil to choose 2 sciences in S5 and then crash 1 in S6.

It was confirmed that studying a modern language to N5 level is compulsory.

Concerns were raised about the teaching of RE in the school.

A parent asked whether the timetabling consultant who had been engaged was still working at the school and was this common practice? PMc said that Tony Conroy had come in to help in a CPD capacity, that yes, he been paid for and that this was not unusual practice. She said he had not written the timetable himself.

A parent thanked PMc for her enthusiasm in discussing the new curriculum and urged more communication with that same enthusiasm and vision.

### **Common Room**

Several parents stated that they believed the common room should be reinstated this term. It was felt to be is a very important part of the learning and development of our young people. The Headteacher's decision to close it permanently was unilateral and deeply unpopular with parents and pupils. Reinstating it will go some way towards restoring morale amongst all pupils and will demonstrate the school's willingness to engage in a collegiate process moving forward.

PMc said that, at the risk of alienating parents, she felt that common rooms were quite anachronistic. She stated that the common room had been closed in December 2013 and remarked that there were very few common rooms in schools across the City. She felt that common rooms could encourage the formation of cliques, that they could lead to indiscipline and encourage the evasion of work. Currently PMc explained that there are no plans to reinstate it.

JK summarised that there was strong feeling amongst many parents and pupils that the common room should be re-instated and a general concern that pupils are not having their voice heard within the school.

### **Communication**

A new parent council email address will be set up and all parents present at the meeting agreed to being communicated with by email by the Parent Council – this will be widened out to as many parents as possible. (Cluny Sheeler and Fiona Bradley).

### **ACTIONS**

- Any parent who wishes to feed back either positive or negative comments about their experience at the school should send them to DA by 14<sup>th</sup> May. They will be collated and forwarded to CEC. (JK and DA)
- The Parent Council will ask CEC what process is being followed to investigate and respond to the dossier of complaints submitted by staff at the school (JK and DA)
- Now that the curriculum choices have been adjusted, S2 pupils will be consulted again to ensure that all are happy with their subject choices as far as possible, (PMc)
- The updated choices tables for current S2 and S4 pupils will be placed on the school website this week. The current S1 pupils' choices table will be available by the end of term. (PMc and CS)
- A new parent council email address will be established (CSh / FB)