

United Parents Group Executive Board Meeting - October 16, 2008

Attendees: Paula Barvin, Jim Butt, Kate Darwin-Liedtka, Emily Reich, Rhonda Feder, Jennie Brantner, Maureen Boland, Sherry Hazlewood, Alexandra Drobac Diagne, Dana Walker, Karen Ugeny, Christa Syulak-Herr, Marlene Dercker, Jeannette Hood, Carol Trotman, Jennie Brantner, Peggy Robertson, Mary Russell, Lise Schwartz, Cherie Leather, Deb Mullgin, Monica Camhi, Jill Fox, Gloria Williams, Jeanne Rauch, Tanya Soboloff, Betsy McKinstry, Laura Stone, Lisa Evan, Geneen Stuart, Jose Sampson, Tee Toliver, Robyn Margasak, Elizabeth Westgard, Cindy Novik, Lori-Widelitz-Cavallucci

Welcome & Approval of Minutes:

Paula welcomed everyone, introduced Jeanne Rauch, and then noted that Dr. Darlene Davis and Jane Best would also be joining the meeting later to discuss this month's topics, the Reading Language Arts Pilot and Academic Rigor. Paula then motioned to approve the UPG minutes from September 2008. Without objection and requiring no discussion, minutes were approved by acclamation.

Treasurer's Report:

Sherry Hazelwood reported that to date, all district PTO's had paid UPG dues except Elkins Park. Sherry then submitted the 2008-2009 proposed budget. A motion was made to accept proposed budget.

There was a brief question as to whether or not the UPG's insurance policy covered the PTO's, and it does not. There was no further discussion and the budget was approved by acclamation.

Guest Speaker:

Jeanne Rauch, Cheltenham School District's Reading and Language Arts Supervisor, began a discussion about the various reading language arts series currently being piloted in grades K-6.

Ms. Rauch explained that Cheltenham's reading program is 9 years old and no longer addresses the standards put forth by the No Child Left Behind initiative. She states that Cheltenham is moving from a "whole language" learning model, to a "balanced literature approach" and therefore a new reading series must be selected.

The process of selecting a new reading series began in the Spring of 2008, when the district conducted all grade level needs assessment. The information gleaned from the assessment was collated and a list of criteria was developed. Simultaneously, the district began reviewing a large selection of reading curriculums from other local districts, collecting data on them, and talking with publishers about success rates etc. Finally, the district formed a "reading committee" to review more intensely reading series based on the list of criteria.

In the end, 3 curriculums from 3 different publishers were selected for piloting and teachers from grades K-6 were asked to volunteer. The publishers trained selected teachers on the new materials. Additionally, participating teachers receive ongoing support from the publishers and are regularly reporting to the "reading committee" about their experiences.

Ms. Rauch stated that the Reading Committee will make their recommendations on the new curriculums by December/January so that district wide training can begin in the spring of 2009, long before the start of the 2009-2010 school year. She urged parents to monitor their child's learning and to give teachers feedback on their impressions so that this information can be considered in the selection process.

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Q & A:

Ms. Rauch's presentation was welcomed and generated a number of questions including:

What part do parents have in the curriculum selection?

Parents are encouraged to give teachers feedback on their child's progress and their impressions of the series. Dr. Davis suggested the Reading and Language Arts specialist could develop a feedback form for parents to complete. The reading committee can then collate the data and add it to the selection process.

Are the series chosen as whole sequences or can the district choose different publishers at the various grade levels?

No, curricula are not necessarily chosen as a full series for all grade levels. The district has the flexibility to choose whatever series best suit each grade level.

Will professional Development occur long before implementation?

Yes. The district hopes to select the new reading series by January so that teacher training can begin soon thereafter.

What kind of grammar component is included in the three, piloted reading series?

Ms. Rauch could not definitively describe the grammar components included in each of the piloted series, but she was very open to hearing from a number of parents who expressed concern that the district's current curriculum has been lacking in grammar instruction. Ms. Rauch was receptive to insuring that this critical aspect of reading and language arts is included in whatever reading series are chosen by the district.

How do we make sure all teachers are covering reading, writing, and grammar?

Dr. Davis responded to this question and stated that the district is looking at models to explore accountability. She recognizes that this is an important issue to parents district-wide and she assured the group that the administration takes accountability seriously. She noted that they are currently implemented "walk-thrus" by principals and other administrators as a first step.

Was the selection of the three, piloted series based on empirical data?

Yes.

UPG President's Reports:

Paula and Jim report that they recently met with Dr. Keifer to discuss the September UPG meeting and the concerns voiced at the meeting that Dr. Keifer was not quite prepared to answer many of the questions put forth. Jim and Paula said that Dr. Keifer was very open to discussing the concerns but noted that he runs a 91 million dollar business and is not equipped to answer every specific question asked. Rather, he hopes that the experts he has hired in his administration can respond to all of our questions over time and he looks forward to sharing information as best he and his administrators can. Jim and Paula noted that they need to be more time-sensitive when presenting questions to Dr. Keifer and the district's administrators so that there is sufficient time to understand and to prepare responses to the questions.

Discussion ensued about Dr. Keifer's role as well as the role of the UPG and how best to exchange communication.

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Paula and Jim gave a brief overview of the TAP awards meeting that was held on October 2, 2008. Paula said there is both PTO and UPG support for the continuation of the TAP program. It is hoped that the UPG & PTO's will expand their outreach to teachers in keeping with the concept of Parents Adding Value to Education (PAVE). To further enhance the value of the TAP awards, it is important that we all do our best to promote the awards as widely as possible and to encourage parents and teachers to submit worthy students for consideration.

PTO Sharing:

The PTO representatives exchanged ideas on how best to encourage parent and teacher involvement in the PTO's. Wyncote Elementary suggested holding some afternoon meetings to reach out to teachers. Cheltenham Elementary suggested having monthly topics that are relevant to parents (as opposed to "activity planning" which can be done outside of the PTO meetings by subcommittees). Elkins Park, Cedarbrook, and Cheltenham High School discussed the idea of having joint meetings to help bridge the transitions between schools.

Academic Rigor:

Jane Best, Director of Gifted Education, was introduced to the group and then a discussion was held about academic rigor. Ms. Best provided many insights regarding the pendulum swings surrounding aspects of rigor. The most common concerns are of tracking and differentiated instruction. Parents want the best for their children (suggesting tracking and highly differentiated instruction), but they can feel that the level of instruction isn't high enough for all children (suggesting de-tracking and a common level of instruction). This is not a resolved issue and may never be fully resolved, but the district works hard to find the right balance at a sufficiently high degree of rigor suitable to the state standards. Parents who feel their child needs certain support or attention should contact their child's teacher or the school administration before contacting the district administration. Schools are in the best position to address these concerns directly.

Meeting was adjourned.