

Joint School Advisory Council Meeting
 Bridgewater Elementary School (BES)/Bridgewater Junior High School (BJHS)
 November 2, 2017
 Minutes

BES SAC		BJHS SAC	
Lindsay Willow, Principal	Claudia Robar, Teacher, Secretary	Daphne Egilsson, Principal	Denise McKean, Teacher
Siobhan Doyle, Parent, Chair	Engelina Crouse, Support Staff	Kim Benjamin, Parent, Chair	Terese Silver, Teacher
Sean MacLeod, Parent, Vice-Chair	Marg Forbes, Community Member	Richard MacMillan, Parent, Secretary	Stacey Colwell, Parent
		Justine Skinner, Verge House	
Regrets		Regrets	
Beth Norwood, Teacher		Patty Culbert, Parent	Amelie Leefe, Student Council
Kelly Sylvester, Teacher		Paul Rogers, Safety Resource Officer	Adam Culbert, Student Council
Heather Dalton, Parent		David Walker, Community, Vice-Chair	

Others in Attendance
Jenna Eason, School Parent
Katie Hannah, School Parent
Shannon Henderson, School Parent
Alana Wentzell, School Parent

Call to Order: Call to order made at 6:02 PM

Approval of Agenda: Agenda approved with the below additions

- Request for information on how many students are in each school and how many are transfers in from outside of the normal boundaries for the schools.
- Request to discuss the Education Admin Review and Survey

Approval of Joint Meeting Minutes: Minutes Approved

Business arising from those minutes:

- Principals to draft letter to parents this week, share with both SAC's - **Completed**
- Send the letter home to parents next week (week starting Oct 23) - **Completed**
 - It was noted that the timeframe for feedback was rushed and did not allow enough time for feedback
- Hold a joint SAC meeting (Open to the public) November 2 - **Completed**
 - It was noted that many people may not have known about the meeting, as minutes were not circulated.
- Take the joint recommendation and additional feedback to the Board's Corporate Services Committee meeting November 8 - **Open**
 - A request to be added to the agenda will be sent this week to ensure being added - **Completed**
 - It was noted that needed to move quickly based on schedules of the school board
 - Discussed the proposal that we request the school board to decouple their motion concerning the grade 5 students from the need to complete a catchment review. It was noted that the motions were not actually specific about the catchment review, although the minutes of that school board meeting referenced the 2nd motion about moving the grade 5's being associated with the catchment review. It was agreed that we don't need to worry about the specifics of how to word the suggestion and just make our recommendations on what we think should be done.

Review of Parent Letters

There were three letters sent to the SAC from parents, all of them expressing concerns about the planned move as well as the reasons cited for the SAC/principals recommending the move, which were felt to be based more on logistics than on what is best for students. It was noted by SAC members that the letter that was sent was not reflective of the extent of the discussion and reasons that we recommended the move and that we had considered and discussed many similar points. It was also noted that at a public meeting held earlier this year, many of these same points were discussed and there was information shared there that informed some of the viewpoints as well as suggestions made on how to address. It was noted by Kim Benjamin (BJHS SAC Chair) that she could not easily find the information from that meeting on the School Board website.

Parent Letters – Summary of Concerns

- There was not enough time allowed for research, reflection and response to the letter
- Grade 5 students are too young and the spectrum of developmental, emotional and social needs would be too wide with such a range of grades.
- The grade 4 students at BES are known to pose challenges both behaviourally and academically and need additional support that would be reduced as a result of such a transition.
- With two grades moving at the same time, it will be harder to identify and help students who are struggling with the transition.
- Grade 5 and 6 students will miss out on opportunities such as Christmas Concerts as well as missed opportunities to develop in sports and other school activities at an elementary level.

Parent Letters – Summary of Questions

- Will the grade 5-6 students have a dedicated space and separate lunch/recess from older students?
- How will bullying be minimized and handled in regards to the younger students as they are at a major disadvantage physically, and emotionally to the older students?
- What kind of educational benefits or losses could this transition have on the children?
- If a comprehensive review of the impact on BES students was not conducted by the SOC prior to their decision has it been done by anyone prior to this decision to move grade 5- 6 students to BJHS? If so, who and what were their findings?
- If the “primary” considerations were “the overcrowding and lack of programming space in the elementary school and equally balancing the enrolment numbers in each building to facilitate better use of the overall physical space and specific spaces such as gymnasiums, cafeterias, etc.”, what other factors were taken into account? such as:
 - Optimal grade configuration for academic excellence - it appears from my reading that most schools faced with restructuring have moved to a model consisting of a grade 6-9 configuration. Many studies highlight the academic losses of younger students transitioning into a junior high setting. (Middle School or Junior High? How Grade Level Configurations Affect Academic Advancement-Elizabeth Dhuey ; Grade Configuration: Who Goes Where?, Catherine Paglin & Jennifer Fager)
 - Student safety- as bullying is still an issue in our schools how will the school minimize the exposure of our youngest students to the potentially greater but not exclusively negative influence of older students?
 - Learning environment- will the school ensure that the newest BJHS’ grade 5-6 students have a dedicated space with separate recess and lunch times independent of older students?
- What is the primary rationale for moving the both the Grade 5 and 6 as opposed to just the grade 6? - is it all about numbers and filling spaces?
- Is this a final decision or is there an opportunity for further discussion regarding moving only Grade 6 BES students to BJHS when they may be more equipped academically, socially, and psychologically, and leaving the Grade 5 students at BES?

Discussion of parent letter feedback

Siobhan Doyle (BES SAC Chair) noted that it is important to talk to school administrative staff, teachers and others about concerns and noted that when it came to her children moving to a school with grades 7-12, she had significant concerns about the age spread, but after learning more about how the grades were handled within the school and how such scenarios worked in other places, she felt better about it. Siobhan also reiterated that in hindsight, our letter to parents citing the reasons we supported such a move was misleading, as it gave the perception that our recommendation was all about space and numbers for their own sake, when in reality, it was about the impact of the space on the social and academic environment and that we considered other factors as well, all based on what is best for the students.

Lindsay Willow (BES Principal) provided some feedback from a review of current research on grade configurations and noted that many suggested a grade Primary to Grade 9 configuration was best and that grades 5 and 6 worked better together in the same school than separated. She also noted that the research showed there was neither a standard approach nor an overwhelming consensus on the best set-up, particularly in American schools (where most of the available research was based). She noted that one thing that was mentioned repeatedly was that all such transitions are traumatic to students and that key mitigation for that is to allow sufficient time to plan and prepare.

Kim Benjamin noted some feedback from Patty Culbert (BJHS SAC Parent Rep) who had done a lot of research and personally advocated for a grade 9 to 12 model for a high school. It was further noted, the schools may go that way anyway since Canada is moving in that direction overall, as well as the province in some areas. Kim provided additional feedback from her own experience, which is that BJHS now feels empty and that the grade 9 students miss the older kids for mentorship, both of which are leading to a school spirit problem.

Lindsay noted that with respect to discipline problems within BES, it is the grade 3 and 4 students that have traditionally had the most discipline problems, much more so than grades 5 and 6, and that is true in any school year. In other words, it is not just the current grade 4 students that pose a particular behavioural or academic concern, but grade 3 and 4 students in general, and this is another reason why it would be beneficial to have less grades in the school as well as more space, as both affect the ability of the school to support the students. She went on to explain how there is a lot of "deregulation" happening with students and that a lot is due to space. Officially the school meets utilization numbers, but there are way more services that need to be in the space than there used to be, leading to overcrowding and cited the example of French classes which are taught in the library. She feels there is a lot of work to be done in the school and kids don't currently feel as if they have a safe space and that the transition will help the P to 4s get better regulation. It was also noted by a parent rep that some feedback from teachers at the public sessions supported the observation that grades 5 and 6 belong more together and that current grade 4's could be left "on an island".

Discussed ways that the situation could be made better for grades 5 and 6 in the other school, such as different use of the cafeteria for lunch time, separate lunch and recess times and possibly separate sections of the building. It was suggested that to help with the perception of how the school will be run that it should be renamed to be a middle school and that the current naming (BJHS) is only mandated for one year through a school board decision.

One of the parents in attendance noted that she he had heard good feedback in the discussions tonight and that she felt more comfortable that we had considered other points beyond those cited in the letter, and that she did not have enough time to respond to the letter so came to the meeting to come to ask questions to alleviate some of her concerns.

Another parent attending noted that she is still unsure about moving the grade 5 students, based on the concern that they are too young, but noted that she agrees with the points made at the meeting and especially the points made about needing to make a decision so that there is enough time to plan.

An SAC parent member noted that the SAC does not have the ability to make the decision, but can focus on making things more positive for the people in the building today, including ensuring that they get information as quickly as possible to allow them to prepare. It was noted that her with the PVEC move of the high school students, they were not well prepared and this lead to a bad experience for some students and that this would have a greater impact on grade 5 and 6 students.

School capacity and grade sizes

- BES currently has 441 students with a capacity of 441 (84% utilization) with 69 students in grade 5 and 66 students in grade 4.
- BJHS currently has 200 students with a capacity of 617 (32% utilization) with ~80 students in grade 9, plus 13 in Verge House.
- Based on those numbers, if the grade 5 and 6 students were to move:
 - BES would be at 309 students with a utilization of 59%
 - BJHS would be at 320 students with a utilization of 52%
- A concern was raised about the utilization formula and whether the school board would move to fill both schools back up, with 72-75% being considered the ideal utilization. This would negate the benefits of the freed up space that Lindsay says is needed at BES. Lindsay said that the school board is aware of the needs of BES, with respect to space, as well as money for upgrades and updates. Alternately, it was suggested that if students are not moved to improve the utilization, one or both schools could face closure.
- Discussed the impact and possible outcomes of the catchment review, which could start in January and be completed fairly quickly. It was suggested that Petite and Pentz schools will get exceptions and others may as well and that there may be more individual transfers, including those for child care reasons (which are not allowed in other school boards and which are potentially subject to abuse). It was noted that improving bussing times was the primary driver for the catchment review and that students attending some other schools have longer drives to their schools than to a Bridgewater school, with Bluenose cited as the school with the greatest difference.
- Daphne Egilsson (BJHS principal) addressed a question about whether a decision was made about Grade 9 students transferring to PVEC, confirming it was decided not to move them, and that it was not considered

Consensus and Next Steps

Discussed the overall recommendation previously made by both SAC's to request the School Board make the decision to move both grade 5 and 6 students next year. There was general but not unanimous agreement on this recommendation, with one suggestion being to wait so there was more time for parents to get information.

Discussed the best way to communicate and get/give information from parents about the move. Ideally we would have at least a month's notice and a public meeting etc but that as a volunteer group, we don't always have the time or resources to do as much as we would like. Some of the parents attending shared feedback from others who feel they have no voice and that this is a done decision. It was noted that the decision is being made by the school board and that we can only make recommendations based on our own understanding and experience and that we don't have the ability to fully investigate all questions or concerns. It was suggested by an SAC parent member that although we strive to gather feedback from other parents and school community members, if time or resources don't allow for that, we also directly represent the school community directly (being composed of parents, teachers, staff and community members).

Additional possibilities discussed were to conduct an informal parent meeting to answer questions and hear suggestions, as that would not take a lot of time to prepare. A "coffee chat" format was suggested as one possible approach, possibly outside the school, so that parents could express concerns and also see that the best interests of the kids is the primary focus. The consensus was to wait until a decision is made by the school board, as the questions and concerns will be different based on the outcome.

It was agreed to proceed with our initial recommendation to the school board that they move both grades 5 and 6 to BJHS for the next school year.

Other Business - School Education Administrative Review

Discussed the current education administrative review being conducted by the Dept of Education; everyone was encouraged to provide feedback. It was also noted that the timeframe to volunteer to be in the focus group was too short.

Next Meeting

Discussed when we should meet again as a joint group and agreed that it should not be during our next regularly scheduled meetings so that we can maintain focus on the current students in school this year.

The next joint meeting will be decided after the decision is made, with a request to have a recap of the school board committee meeting sent after it is done

Adjournment at 7:51 PM