

Good Evening

My report to you this month is painful for me because parents and teachers of this wonderful school have invested so much time and effort in order to develop a truly unique learning environment for our children. We now see growing disaffection from parents, and we must bring that message to you. In the Governing Board's bylaws the first duty of the PTCA is to "gather and share with the Board at its monthly meetings parent interests, opinions, and input on any important issue that comes before the Board or is deemed important by parents."

What is the problem I must report?

So that we are clear, let me tell you what the problem is not.

It is not the teachers who work so tirelessly on our children's behalf. It is not the administrators and staff who work daily to create a positive learning environment. It is not the parents who devote unpaid hours to supporting the school's mission and vision. It is not the Board's leadership which has led us through difficult political and financial fights over the past two years.

The problem is that we are failing to communicate and collaborate together as a community. We are not establishing shared goals that we can all work together to achieve. We are all pulling in different directions, which will lead us nowhere productive, and lately has served to divide us in the important work of educating our children.

I am worried. What had been a growing, quiet concern of the PTCA parent leaders that what was a subtle disconnect between the school leadership and the parents has become a crisis for our community. The PTCA has been putting some thought into this problem all year. We want to help the community think beyond involvement: as in "what can our parents do to help and support teachers?" and instead be more meaningful in our contributions. Parents are not just here to cover the walls for testing, cut out laminated student work, or rake the leaves. While we love these kinds of projects, it is only the means to our primary goal: building a community. To do that, ALL of us – parents, teachers and administrators, and the Board, have to work together in a spirit of open and honest cooperation. We cannot shy away from the difficulty of disagreement or conflict, but rather model for our children the problem-solvers we want them to be.

Over the last month it seems at almost every turn, I am confronted with evidence that we are not working together and I see the damage that is causing to the relationships between parents and teachers. Parental involvement and support for the school's teachers has been such an ingrained part of our culture that I cannot believe it is at risk.

I listened to the early stages of your calendar debate last month with growing dismay. I wanted to caution the Board and administration about entering into this policy change at that moment since I knew it would catch parents unaware, just as the change in the elementary campus dismissal process did just about this time a year ago. The process that was used to arrive at *that decision* caused long-lasting damage to relationships in our school, some of which are just starting to heal. Instead, the wounds are now reopened, and again, parents find themselves an afterthought to the decisions that affect our children's education and our home lives.

When I heard of the outcome of the vote the next morning, I had a sinking feeling. Between the two PTCA Vice-Presidents, Terry Roth and Sonia Fuller, and myself, we attended all of the calendar meetings to get a sense of parental concerns. We listened carefully to parents' remarks and to the administration's responses. In summary, some parents are fine with it; we get that and heard that.

But we also heard quite a few that were not. The most troubling issue was the lack of clarity communicated about the plan itself, and the need for it. When parents asked for more options or expressed frustration with the process, the response was that the Board had already voted. When they pointed to the loss in instructional time, the administration disagreed. The message was: "The deal is done. You are too late to the party even though you didn't receive an invitation."

Even if these changes are a good idea, my suggestion to you is to go slowly, take small steps, evaluate the results, and then adjust or expand. The process of making these decisions was flawed and we all need more time. We must listen to dissent and evaluate it. We cannot simply dismiss it because it doesn't suit us.

The stakes, to us, are high. Each and every one of our students doesn't get this next year back. If more planning time is not the key to successfully raising academic achievement, then we've failed them. If losing instructional time has a negative effect on our students' test scores, then we risk our charter. Many middle school parents are stunned that the leadership is moving to less time for our children to learn, when what they want to see is more time for their children to learn.

I had not planned to share that opinion with you tonight. I made these suggestions in the meetings I attended, hopeful that I had planted the seeds you'd need to arrive there on your own.

Last Tuesday night's PTCA general meeting convinced me that as President of the PTCA, I must speak up; the PTCA could no longer try to work quietly to influence our parent and school leadership to make small changes that would bridge this growing divide. Parents value our teachers and the work they do, and it is so painful to find ourselves on opposite ends of any debate. While we desperately want to partner with teachers and administrators to create an environment where they can thrive, we parents also have a duty to set priorities for our children's academic, social, and emotional growth. Parental involvement is not about writing checks and hosting coffees or ice cream socials. It is about parents being full partners (along with teachers, administrators and Board members and) acting together to make decisions regarding our children's education. This has always been an environment that not just encouraged parent involvement, but has embraced it as part of our school culture.

Why is it that we are not working together? In my opinion, the problem is well illustrated in what happened last Tuesday night, a perfect storm of communication missteps that have raised the stakes even higher. The only evening meeting for parents to discuss moving away from the APS calendar to an ANCS-only, balanced calendar AND reducing instructional time was scheduled by the administration to occur the thirty minutes prior to the PTCA meeting where the draft Strategic Plan was to be shared. I was not consulted in regards to this plan. This was not enough time.

Parents expressed legitimate concerns about their late invitation to the decision-making process, the biased manner input was solicited from parents, and the impacts to instructional time and family life. They needed to be listened to in a respectful manner so thoughtful dialogue could occur. This did not happen because the calendar meeting over-ran the start of the PTCA meeting, and parents who were there to attend the PTCA meeting had to wait before we could start. These parents, many of whom had

rushed from work to be present to hear about the draft Strategic Plan, were subsequently short-changed on time to discuss the topics on the PTCA agenda. This put me in the unenviable position of having to cut the thirty-minute calendar and instructional dialogue short, prior to any feeling of closure, in order to start our scheduled PTCA meeting. Then at the end of the PTCA meeting, I had to do a repeat performance of calming an increasingly alarmed group of parents.

What was so alarming about the first look at the Strategic Plan? The draft of the Strategic Plan was emailed to the parent community at 6:00 the morning of the PTCA meeting. Many parents did not have time to read and digest it prior to the meeting. It was made up of bullet points with little explanation or narrative to explain the process, the feedback from various focus groups, or the rationale. This is a terribly important process, and it cannot be rushed through. The Draft Strategic Plan alarmed parents in attendance as they saw a Plan that did not significantly reflect their concerns and certain provisions would further dilute parent involvement in the decision-making process. The entire evening suggested to me and to others that in time, parents would be disenfranchised from their traditional role in our school's culture.

In the aftermath of the meeting, the concerns parents have brought to me are startling. A kindergarten father confided that if the school didn't get its act together, he would send his child to Parkside. A number of parents who participated in the focus groups were critical of the Draft Plan, especially since none of their major concerns were reflected in the goals they saw. They questioned the objectivity of the process. With funding restored, parents expected teacher to student ratios to diminish, especially in the primary grades; associate teachers in 3rd through 5th grade to return; increased academic accountability and transparency at the middle campus; and the return of Spanish to the elementary grades. Not only were these goals barely visible in the Draft Plan presented to us, we, parents, were absent. Parental involvement, one of the most important predictors of a child's success in school, was no longer one of the pillars upon which we build the school community. (The PTCA does not consider fundraising and volunteering to be parental involvement although those are practices we support as a means to increase parental involvement.)

This was not the only communication vacuum for parents in that week. Thursday many middle campus parents received report cards. Included was a document from the Georgia Department of Education showing academic growth demonstrated on CRCT scores from the two previous years. In many cases parents learned their children showed single digit percentile growth in social studies and science when compared to their peers statewide. While the State provided clear written instructions on how to read the document, the school provided no messaging, no explanation for the low ANCS scores, no town hall meeting.

Just a reminder to everyone here: we are talking about the week after parents put on an auction that will raise in excess of \$100,000 for the operating budget of the school.

My primary concern (all of ours, I believe) is that parents are being increasingly left out of the initial discussion about any problem, challenge, or crisis our school faces. The PTCA is then left to be the coffee and cookie cheerleaders for decisions we neither helped to craft nor with which we necessarily agree. I want to be extremely clear — we are not talking about communication vehicles — the how, but we are concerned primarily about the what and the when. We are talking about open and honest, EARLY dialogue of important matters — not knee-slap responses of “we need to get our parents involved,” especially after a vote already occurs or a policy is changed — and the timing of communication with parents. When communication with parents by the administration or the Board occurs like it has in the

past week, it is meaningless. And I would add, it is without a doubt, harmful to the relationships between teachers and parents, administrators and teachers, and administrators and parents.

Where can we find solutions?

We need to return to some of the integral practices that built this school in the first place. We all have to begin working together for common goals. We need to talk with each other and arrive at a consensus before policies are brought to the Governing Board, and before decisions that affect our children are made.

In that spirit, the PTCA officers, have three recommendations. The first one is to put the strategic planning process back on track. Last Tuesday night, I suggested adding additional sessions for parent feedback to the calendar so that parents can give input in the strategic planning process. The committee driving the process began planning immediate revisions and scheduling additional sessions that maintain the time line and allow for additional drafts and input. With the changes I've seen, I have confidence that those planning the sessions will ensure they are long enough, that the materials will be clear, and the discussions productive. No parent should feel unheard during a discussion about their child's educational environment. I have hope that the next version, Draft of the Strategic Plan 2.0, will not suffer from the same defects in communication and substance as the first.

But that is not enough. Our two other suggested recommendations are designed to ensure parental involvement remains as part of our school culture and to improve communications between parents and the school:

First, create a subcommittee of the PTCA made up of the elected parent officers. This subcommittee would become the Parent Advisory Council who would act much as the PTAs in APS do: to provide parental input on policy changes that affect the academic, safety and well-being, and culture of the school. This would provide an institutionalized way for parents to provide feedback and input to the administration and the Board. The PAC would help determine whether input was most appropriate via a survey, town hall meetings, or some other means, and collaborate with the administration in the communication process to solicit parental input.

This must be a two-way process: where the PAC can bring issues to the table as well as review the administration's proposals and make recommendations to the Board based on the feedback it receives from parents. Parents have legitimate concerns and for now, there is no way for them to bring them to the table, no matter how important they may be to even health and safety.

This more formal process aligns well with the first duty of the PTCA as already listed in the Board's bylaws. We are to be the bridge between parent concerns and teacher/administrative concerns. Since everyone hasn't been sitting at this table for as long as others, it's important to realize that in past iterations of the Board's bylaws, the PTCA president had a seat on the Board. At one time, there was also a Parent Involvement Chair who also sat on the Board. These individuals were there to make sure parents had a direct voice for Board decisions.

As an aside, I do want to remind the Board, as you are debating tonight's business, that you can turn to me in my role as PTCA president and ask me for input. I am not a voting member of the Board, but I am elected by the parent community to be their representative for this purpose. And in reality that's why I am here tonight and why I or one of the vice presidents has been here each Board meeting this year.

Secondly, the first order of business the PAC would consider bringing to the Board would be to begin the process of developing a teacher and parent contract that provides the terms of parental involvement at ANCS. This document would clearly define roles and responsibilities for the school, teachers, and parents so that their work together remains focused on the best interests of the child. The PAC would seek parental input; the administration would seek teacher input, and then together draft a contract and work collaboratively to vet through the same process. We see this process as a way to help our community think about what appropriate parental involvement looks like and how each of us contributes to the success of our school.

For those of you new on the Board, this may seem radical. Why not trust the professionals and go with the flow? Why give up your precious evening family time to wrangle over shifting the calendar or the loss of instructional time? We must because that's always been the culture of this school. When we were faced with the financial crisis of the past two years, the parents in this school swung into action to save its financial life. We wrote letters, signed petitions, attended numerous community meetings, various APS Board and its committee meetings and two court hearings. We got energized enough to support one of our fellow parents to run for office. We worked on multiple APS Board campaigns and harangued politicians.

As parents we generally don't get do-overs. Our children have one shot at these K-8 years. If the experiment fails, then they suffer the consequences. Parents want transparency in academics, administrative processes, and Board business. We want to be communicated with in a respectful and honest manner by our leaders; and we want the professionals to trust us, and we want to trust them.

This is a long speech for me. I suppose it's payback for all the short reports I've given you so far this year. We make these remarks in the spirit of cooperation and with the utmost respect for everyone in our school community. We trust and believe that an open and honest approach to problems is the only way to resolve them. That is what I have tried to report to you tonight. Thank you for your consideration.