

## **PCO Meeting April 14, 2016**

**Kate Brennan – PCO Moderator (filling in for Christy Fitzpatrick-Burns)**

### **Beautification Project/Playground Update**

Jon McCann (ECS CEO) gave an update on the Beautification Project at the Lower School. The Lower School project has been going on for a long time. \$125K project. We currently have a balance of \$74K (\$60K from Ambrusko fund. \$14K from Blooming Bash). Another \$51K to go. It's been a tough year with the budget impasse. Last Friday funds were transferred from the State. There was a big impact on the school budget. \$125K doesn't go very far. Jon said that we will be stretching dollars further by taking advantage of PA Act 39 which allows public schools to invest in energy reduction/lighting projects without a bidding process. Normally, we are held to a prevailing wage provision which is expensive because we are charged additional fees for construction and renovation projects which are not reflective of the actual wage rates in the local community. We'll invest in AC & heating for the Upper School in June 2017 and then couple the Lower School Beautification Project with this project to allow the \$125K to go further. Phase 1 is the lower quadrant, flat area, removal of a tree, install double tree house structure, boulders on the hill and drainage mitigation. This spring, before Phase 1 officially starts, a pergola will go up in the upper yard, extension of edible school yard, fruit yard, and a rain racer. Jon stated that it took the project much longer than anticipated. Fundraising will take place for another 51K.

Lisa Perry (ECS Development Officer) announced that she will be looking for foundation grants and look to stretch the money further to help support the project. She's looking for creative ideas to raise additional funds quickly to help get the project off the ground. She will look to the PCO for support. More information from Lisa to come over the summer and next school year.

Question: Can we still donate to certain components of the playground?

Answer: Yes, should still be on the website. <http://ecspco.org/2015/04/15/lower-school-playground-campaign-continues/>

Lisa: In addition, we're looking for cash donations.

Jon: We'll put an update in the Wednesday Word. There will be some weekends for families to help prepare the grounds and digging weekends for brick project will take place as well.

### **ECS Academic Calendar**

Kate thanked the audience for coming this evening. Administration is eager to answer questions.

Kate informed the audience that the PCO identified the overarching concerns to make sure everyone's voices were heard. The PCO compiled questions. Kate asked the audience to please hold questions and comments til the end. Jon will stay after for additional questions and concerns.

### **History**

- 1) Can you provide an overview of the reasoning behind the extended academic year and educational day at ECS? How does the charter influence the academic calendar?***

First, Jon announced that he's available anytime, email him, call him, stop by his office.

Jon: In 2007 when the charter was written it was easy to write in an extended school year. 192 days were written in and this is a legal binding agreement. Any change is a material change in the charter and must be put through the Pittsburgh Public School board. He can't say it's good, but it's a legal binding agreement. The academic calendar tells us how many days we have to run. We marry this with PPS major holidays.

**2) *Why is professional development/planning scheduled on half days instead of full days off?***

Jon: A half day counts as a day in school, so if we take a full day then we push the school year back as well. The use of half days allows us to use the afternoons for staff development without adding to the calendar year.

**3) *Why does the new focus on Project-Based Learning at ECS lead to an increase in professional development time in next year's calendar?***

Jon: Teachers have a need for more time. They don't have text books and they write their own curriculum. They are trying to create authentic learning experiences and that takes time to plan. We have to have balance to find what works for everyone. Some half days are for planning and some for professional development programs. Half days are used well for staff.

Ashley Bergman (Lower School Principal): A lot of authentic learning experiences are student driven. Kids are leading what is happening and teachers need time to make adjustments.

Jon: Why do we need more time now rather than before? The focus is to capture more academic standards and wrap them into authentic experiences and that leads to an increased time for planning and more structure to support teachers.

Kate: A great educational model requires more time for planning.

**Calendar**

**4) *Why were Wednesdays chosen for half days?***

Ashley: As teachers asked for more time, we realized that Fridays were not the most productive time for planning. We can get more out of them in the middle of the week when they're more focused. This allows them to push into the end of the week.

Jon: In this case, teachers get the benefit but not the community. Jon is aware of this inconvenience and will take a closer look at it.

**5) *Can half days be limited to a more reasonable number each year, like 8-10?***

Jon: It's a structural thing. We can work to limit it. We realize there is a lot of angst around this. In the original charter there were half days every other week on Fridays. But we used text books and couldn't warrant so many half days. As we move to more authentic learning practices, there

is a need for more planning time and an increase in half days. Now we put a seismic shift in next year's calendar. Jon understands that half days are miserable for parents. We can work with teachers and the parent community to get to the balance. One example of a compromise is to have staff come back earlier from winter break.

**6) *Has the school considered alternatives to half days, such as a rotating schedule for staff planning, allowing for more consistency in the students' weekly schedules?***

Jon: We have, but it's a nightmare. We would rely heavily on substitute teachers. It's unreliable to provide professional development in this way. It's disruptive, and we have a lack of substitutes. It's tricky to organize it internally. They're thinking about full time building subs but that may not fit in the budget. We are still in the problem-solving process and looking at several options.

**7) *Can the timing of the half days change? For example, can dismissal start at 1 or 1:30pm instead of 11:30am, leading to more instructional time and fewer childcare hours?***

Jon: This is one of the great ideas that came through feedback from parents. Currently it's tough to get lunches in, movies are being watched; changing the time will allow for more instructional time. This minimal change can have a dramatic effect, so it's being considered.

**8) *How was the PCO involved in the creation of the calendar? Why weren't parents surveyed before the calendar was published?***

Jon: I went through a similar process as previous years. I went to representatives from the PCO to make sure we don't bump into holidays. I do it quickly and get it done quickly because there is a lot of pressure to get it out. This time I caused a ruckus. I got plenty of good push-back. Moving forward, I've learned that if I'm going to make a seismic shift I need to include more people. This was a miss for me and I apologize. I want to resolve it quickly and get it back out to parents. We want to move this quickly to a place that everyone can be comfortable with.

Kate: I was one of the people that saw the calendar, pointed out some concerns, and I did notice that there were a lot of half days and pointed out that it would be tricky for parents. We didn't feel like it was our role to accept or deny what has been proposed in the calendar.

**9) *Is ECS open to changing the calendar based on community feedback, and if so, when can we expect the final draft?***

Jon: We will take a week and review the feedback and information, and update the calendar quickly. Keep the feedback coming.

**10) *Can we expect next year's half day schedule to continue into future years, or is this a one-year plan?***

Jon: We'll definitely continue to have half days. I went to PPS to ask about reducing the number of days in the calendar and that was denied. One idea that came from an ECS family is to

maintain the start and end dates of the ECS academic year, but add some full planning days in for staff throughout the year. This would reduce our reliance on half days, give the staff the planning time they need, and reduce the number of instructional days for students. PPS would need to approve this.

**11) *What will instruction look like on half days? Will it be meaningful or will teachers be allowed to show movies?***

Ashley: We recently did some investigations to see what was going on on half days. The academic curriculum is normally so robust that teachers take advantage of half days to do some classroom community building, Olweus lessons, positive behavior support, special projects and more. The students may spend the time in their homebase the whole time which feels different to them, but is no less productive. No movies for entertainment! Check the recent Lower School Twitter feed for a peek at what happens on half days. At the Upper School, it may be hard to get three robust blocks into a half day, so they may rotate and do Math on one half day, and the other blocks on other half days, for example.

Kate: For younger kids it might not feel as academic because it's different than what they're normally doing on regular days. The translation coming home from children after a community day may skew parents' views of how productive the day was.

Ashley: Academic clips of movies may be played which are a few minutes in length, and that might feel like a movie to some young kids and they could be reporting that they watched a movie, but it's not for entertainment. If clips are shown it's for academic reasons and ties into the curriculum.

**12) *Will students be penalized for missing half days if ECS cannot accommodate them with affordable, adequate childcare?***

Jon: Yes, we are legally bound to mark them as absent. We're a public school and it's not up to us, but we have to mark them absent. We're audited more than other traditional schools. State reviews absences. The goal is to provide the childcare necessary to serve our community effectively.

**Childcare**

**13) *Will childcare be available until 5 or 6 pm?***

Kristan Abeshouse (E-Day Director): That's our goal. We are looking at staffing increases and we will change the policy on half days.

**14) *Will childcare be affordable or free for those in need of financial assistance or with multiple children enrolled?***

Kristan: Yes. We're looking at new model, it may be pay what you can. We want to make it affordable for those in need. If some parents can pay more, we're looking to balance it out and explore our options.

**15) What are the staff to child ratios in childcare?**

Amy Bianco (Program Director for E-Day, Recess Monitor, Upper School Exploratory Teacher):  
Two adults per 25 kids.

**16) What activities/services will be provided during childcare?**

Amy: We will have a lot of outside time, going to the park, we have a very talented staff. Could be a themed day with guests, like the past Stay & Plays have had. Exciting opportunities.

**17) Will childcare be able to accommodate special needs children?**

Kristan: Yes, 16% of our population has IEP. This doesn't stop after the school bell rings. Children transition right into after-school activities.

Ashley: We have supplied extra support, extra staffing at E-day in the past for special needs children.

**18) Will there be a limit for how many students can be accepted into half day childcare?**

Kristan: Yes there will be a limit, due to staffing.

**19) Will busing be provided after childcare?**

Kristan: We have over 5-7 districts, so it's tricky to organize with all districts. Busing is out of my control and will not be provided.

Ashley: We can't rent a PPS bus that's not in the PPS district.

**Socioeconomic diversity of our school community**

**20) Has the school considered how to make the schedule equitable for all families, regardless of socioeconomic status?**

Jon: That's a lens that we look through any time we build structures, foundations in the school. Will we get it right every time? No, but I understand that we will get necessary push-back from the community. The board is doing a comprehensive audit, looking through that very lens. As we plan anything we do, any structure, piece of writing, curriculum, PCO event, how does it impact the community? We found that half days were planned at the expense of our families and that's problematic. I will take feedback at any time, around any of these issues, and I will reevaluate.

Lisa: This questions leans toward affordability of childcare, and as the Development Officer at the school, that can be a component of my work. I can try to raise funds to help with this affordability and that are restricted for this purpose.

**21) Will school administration consider creating a committee of parents representing the diverse needs of the school community when planning the calendar in the future?**

Jon: We did seven years with no ripple. The lesson I learned is that if I'm making a seismic shift, I will indeed create a process that gathers the members of our community. I apologize that you had to take time out to come tonight because of my choices. Facebook is a one thing, but if you have concerns, please come see me at my office at Shady Lane to address them. My extension is x302.

**Possible Solutions**

**22) What are reasonable solutions that ECS can provide in response to community feedback about the academic calendar?**

Jon: Everything is on the table. Thanks to the PCO for gathering all of the questions and making sure all voices were heard. Yes, our job over the next week is to capture all of these great ideas and make sure we come up with a solution that captures as much as we can. As I look at the list, most short term stuff will be captured in the upcoming calendar year. Longer term in the years to come. An updated version will be available hopefully within a week. This journey is representative of our guiding principles and should reflect them, i.e. collaboration. We want to march forward.

**Audience Q & A**

**Q:** Thanks to everyone for planning tonight's meeting. These pieces (childcare/scheduling) are tricky on a good day, and they are a time and the pocketbook hit, especially for single parents. What is the process to come to the compromise a week from today? The PCO stated that they are conduits to the school administration as opposed to accepting or denying the calendar. If there's something that triggers a red flag, can the PCO come to parents for more feedback?

Jon: this needs to be a speedy update. I understand that every day is a massive hit on the budget. I'm uniquely aware of this, especially after the conversations over the past two weeks. I know it's super difficult. Long term, I pledge to work towards reducing the amount of half days to benefit the families. I know there needs to be a balance between the needs of families and the school. We want to be as flexible as we can. I can always come to parents to chat if you can't come to me.

**Q:** Can you clarify the steps for what's happening next?

Jon: this will live with me, then I'll meet with the two principals and then reach out to the Executive Committee of the PCO and share changes. If you have questions, I encourage you to reach out to me. I'll do my best to strike a balance but I can't guarantee all Wednesdays will be changed. Rely on me, I heard you loud and clear.

Parent statement: Having the document that the PCO put into place with concerns and feedback will guide you well (see Appendix below).

**Q:** E-Day question. Do you envision the half days as part of E-Day or separate?

Kristan: No decision has been made yet.

Amy: We still have some things to look at from a staffing perspective. There's a few puzzle pieces missing. We need to create a model to follow each time.

**Q:** Can parents provide support or volunteer for childcare if that means more families can take advantage of it?

Kristan: Yes, if you have clearances. Parents can volunteer, we can hire parents, we could have a fundraiser around this. Would love to release calendar and have care provided for all children in need on all days. Planning is still in process.

Kate: Can we tap into relationships in community? Additional support, the zoo, Science Center, places that might be willing to collaborate.

Parent statement: I'm a fundraiser and foundations are struggling with funding after school programs. It would be great to offer to have ECS as a test to become a model for after school childcare through an organization and get funding to do that.

Kate: United Way just launched an arm that has after school care. We have a lot of parent resources and knowledge that we can put our heads together to figure out more solutions.

Jon: we are struggling to hire quality staff for E-day. If you know people we could leverage, please pass on the word. ECS alumni who are in high school are options.

Kristan: We have a 10<sup>th</sup> grader (ECS alum) from Penn Hills as staff in the Lower School currently. The market in Pittsburgh is robust and we have a lot of competition. It's only 15 hours per week, so it's a struggle to find high quality staff.

**Q:** Could the PCO help coordinate some type of co-op?

Kate: That's a great idea and we should think about that more.

**Q:** If we can only accommodate current E-day kids, can you poll other parents to determine the need for non-E-Day children to prepare for how many staff to hire?

Kristan: Yes, we are going to do that. The goal is to provide it for everybody who needs it. We will survey parents to see what their needs are. I don't want to lock it into E-Day-only families.

Kate thanked everyone for coming and responding to the concerns. We are working hard to help everyone recognize that as a parent at ECS you are automatically part of the PCO, no fee, no membership. We understand evening meetings are a challenge but there are other ways to get involved.

## Appendix

The PCO recognizes and want to share with the ECS administration that many families:

- find the proposed half day schedule for 2016-2017 to be a financial and logistical hardship on their families,
- feel that a half day scheduled in the middle of the week is a disruption to both the students at school and family life at home and work,
- prefer full days off as opposed to half days,
- are concerned about the instructional value of half days,
- will be unable to take advantage of childcare if it is only provided until 3 pm as the school survey suggested and instead will be forced to keep their children out of school on half days,
- are able to take advantage of half days on Fridays to plan family trips, but mid-week half days make this impossible,
- will use all of their family's vacation time on half days and will be unable to take family vacations which affects the family's wellbeing,
- realize that professional development and staff planning time is essential, but still find the excessive number of interrupted weeks to be a burden,
- are concerned about how the half day schedule will affect the diverse overall population of the school, from increasing student absences to financial hardships to families leaving ECS altogether to avoid the burden imposed by the schedule.