

KIDS' COUNCIL MEETING

April 15, 2010
6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Agenda

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| A. | Call to Order / Announcements | David Maher (6:00) |
| | • Introductions | |
| B. | Review / Adoption | Mary Wong (6:15) |
| | • October 15, 2009 Meeting Minutes | |
| | • March 25, 2010 Meeting Minutes | |
| | • Kids' Council FY2010 Budget | |
| | 1. Budget Goals & Performance Measures | |
| | 2. Funding | |
| C. | Public Commentary | David Maher (6:25) |
| D. | Kids' Council Self-Evaluation | Geoff Marietta (6:30) |
| E. | Presentation & Discussion | |
| | • Middle Schools | Jeff Young (6:40) |
| F. | Update Report on
Youth Involvement Subcommittee (YIS) | YIS Members (7:30) |
| G. | Next Steps | David Maher (7:55) |
| | • Next Kids' Council Meetings: May 20 (6:00 – 8:00pm) | |
| | • May 20th Meeting: Outcome Subcommittees' Presentation on Indicators & Measures & Council Self-Evaluation Results | |

Cambridge Kids' Council Meeting 15 April 2010

Present: Mayor David Maher (chair), Ken Reeves (co-chair), Billy Andre, Tina Alu, Ellen Semonoff, Andrea Collymore, Jeff Young, Neal Michaels, Cheyenne Jones, Pasang Lhamo, Robel Phillipos, Sam Seidel, Mary Wong

Guests: Members of the Youth Involvement Subcommittee, Bridget Rodriguez, Geoff Marietta, Nancy Tauber, Claude Jacob (in attendance for Dennis Keefe), Daniel Ruben, Allentza Michel, Sunaree Marshall, Natalie Nguyen, Vincent Germano

A. Call to Order / Announcements

Mayor Maher calls the meeting to order at 6:13 pm.

Mayor Maher welcomes everyone to the meeting, mentions the beautiful weather outside (as well as the prediction that it won't last), and invites all present to introduce themselves, which they do.

B. Review / Adoption

Mayor Maher invites Mary Wong, Executive Director of the Kids' Council, to walk the Council through the review and adoption of old business.

Mary states there are three items, including minutes from the meeting of 15 October 2009, minutes from the meeting of 26 March 2010, and the Kids' Council FY2010 budget. Mary asks if there are any questions.

Claude Jacob asks for recognition, and upon receiving such from Mayor Maher, indicates that his name has been misspelled on the meeting minutes pending approval.

Ken Reeves asks if there is a quorum, and Mary informs him there is. Ken goes on to state the Kids' Council is formed by ordinance to include many stakeholders in the outcomes of youth, and takes note that there are many members of the council, who serve on it by virtue of their positions with the City, who are not present tonight.

Mary reiterates that there is, in fact, a quorum tonight and asks for adoption of the items mentioned.

Action Taken: Neal Michaels motions for joint adoption of the minutes from the Kids' Council meeting of 15 October 2009 and 26 March 2009 (with the correct spelling of Claude Jacob's name), and of the Kids' Council FY2010 budget. Tina Alu seconds the motion. The motion passes by unanimous vote of the Council members present. The documents are adopted.

C. Public Commentary

Mayor Maher invites members of the public to speak. There are none who wish to do so.

D. Kids' Council Self-Evaluation

Mayor Maher invites Geoff Marietta to walk the Council through its self-evaluation.

Geoff introduces himself, and reminds the Council he has spoken to it before. He asks members of the Council to look for the self-evaluation forms in their handouts.

Mary informs the Council that the evaluation forms should be in the packets.

Geoff states the surveys will remain anonymous and they shouldn't take long to complete. He informs the Council the questions are based on tested collaborative assessments and also include some questions based on the Council's work from this year. He stresses the importance of honest and thorough responses, and reiterates the anonymity of responses.

Claude wonders about collecting responses from members of the Council not present. Mary responds that she will take care of this.

Billy Andre asks if the questionnaires should be completed before leaving the meeting. Geoff responds that this would be preferable for to avoid losing them.

Mary offers that Geoff has pens for anyone who might need one.

Ken asks Geoff to elaborate on the reason for this self-assessment. Geoff responds that the Council's strategic plan includes a goal of assessing the progress of the Council over the course of the year. This survey, Geoff notes, is a step in this process, getting a sense of how the Council feels about its communication, the frequency of its meetings, and other things. Results of the survey will provide the council with a sense of its strengths and weaknesses.

Mary asks Geoff to share his background with the Council. Geoff states his work is on a volunteer basis, his background is in public education, he is currently studying collaborations in public education, and he is working with Professor Monica Higgins.

Ken asks if the survey will be distributed to members of the Council not present this evening. Geoff responds affirmatively, and indicates he will be working with Mary to ensure the anonymity of their responses.

Billy asks if there are any extra copies, to which Geoff responds affirmatively.

Mayor Maher wonders if there are any other questions for Geoff. Seeing none, he moves on.

E. Presentation and Discussion

Mayor Maher notices that Jeffrey Young, who is scheduled to give a presentation at this time, has left the room for the moment. He suggests the Council move to the next item on the agenda.

F. Update Report on Youth Involvement Subcommittee (YIS)

Mary states that the YIS report should not be broken up, and that perhaps it would be better to move on to the next item.

Mayor Maher decides to move the Council to Next Steps.

G. Next Steps

Mayor Maher informs the Council that the next meeting will occur on May 20, from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm, in the second floor conference room of the City Hall Annex on Broadway Street. He shares that this next meeting will focus on a discussion of indicators and measures and on the self-evaluation results.

Mary adds that Julie Wilson, a collaborator of the Council at the Harvard Kennedy School, will be facilitating this discussion as well as discussions with the outcome subcommittees.

Mayor Maher indicates that Jeffrey Young has returned, and that his presentation should proceed.

E. (returning) Presentation and Discussion

Mayor Maher introduces Dr. Jeffrey Young, the Superintendent of Schools, who will be giving a presentation and leading a discussion on the middle school initiative.

Jeff Young thanks the mayor for his introduction, and the mayor and Mary for inviting him to speak. He shares the following, in the hopes of bringing the Council up-to-date on the process through which the schools have been working regarding middle-school-aged students:

Specifically, middle grades in this context refers to students in grades six, seven, and eight, or students roughly between the ages of 11 and 14. Upon beginning his post in July, Jeff was informed by the School Committee that one of its major upcoming goals was to study the existing programs in place for the middle grades and make recommendations for programs and policies aimed at affecting the academic, social, and emotional lives of these students. There has been a great deal of interaction and communication with the staff and with the community. There has also been communication with the School Committee. There has been a strong effort to reach out to teachers, especially through the Cambridge Teachers Association, and to get their input on what a good process for this would be. There has been communication with principals, there have been teacher forums, there has been a meeting with all the teachers at the ninth grade campus, and there has been an electronic survey sent to both staff and parents, including lengthy responses to the open-ended section. There were meetings with current high school students reflecting on their middle-grade experience. In short, there has been a strong effort to get opinions, data, and ideas. Also, there was a meeting of the School Councils, which bring together teachers, students, parents, community members, and administration. This meeting brought together almost all of the individual councils, with somewhere close to 150 people in attendance.

The problem at hand is multi-faceted. It involves student achievement, including such issues as how well students are performing and whether they feel challenged. It involves the student experience, including the impact of small cohort sizes at certain schools. It involves teacher experience, including the impact of there not being many teachers in a given subject at a given school, and what the toll of such isolation is on teachers. It involves parent perceptions, which are varied. Many parents are satisfied with the education provided by Cambridge, and many parents find that it is not working for their own children, even if it is working for others. It involves the question of equity versus excellence, which is to ask how to make sure that all students have an equitable chance at excellence.

In most school districts in the United States, a line graph showing academic achievement that is classified by various subgroups of the students will look similar to the one in Cambridge, which is that White and Asian students, in the aggregate, score at high levels, and the other groups, which are special-education, low-income, LEP, African-American, and Hispanic students, all score somewhat lower, with a sizeable gap between the higher-achieving groups and the lower-achieving groups. This is what is known as the achievement gap. In the last seven years, the gap has closed a little bit in some subjects in Cambridge, but it is still unacceptable.

Cambridge organizes its schools in the following way: there are 11 schools for grades K to 8, one school for grades K to 6, and all of these schools feed into Cambridge Rindge and Latin School (CRLS). The question is, are Cambridge's schools the right size? The only school districts in the area that also have this K-8 model are Brookline and Somerville, so it would be instructive to compare the size of Cambridge's schools with those of Brookline and Somerville. Brookline has eight schools that run K-8, and none of them have fewer than 400 students. Somerville has six K-8 schools, one of which has fewer than 400 students. In Cambridge, eight of the eleven K-8 schools have fewer than 400 students. This is useful in understanding how it is that Brookline or Somerville operates.

It is also important to recognize the assets of the Cambridge schools, so as to build on the current strengths instead of trying to turn the whole system upside-down. These assets include a strong sense of affiliation felt by teachers, students, and parents to their own schools. Another asset is the commitment of the teachers and of the administrators. There are also strong community resources from business, from the Mayor's office, from the City Manager's office, and from many other elements of the Cambridge community.

All these considerations play into the one question: what do 11-14 year-olds need? Form should follow function in designing and developing the program and the recommendations. It is important to first figure what the goal is and then design a program to achieve that goal. The goals, then, are as follows.

A coherent, rigorous curriculum: A coherent curriculum would tie an educational career into a coherent unit. What's taught in grade seven reinforces what was taught in grade six and foreshadows what will be taught in grade eight. A rigorous curriculum would be challenging and would make students use their minds. This is different than just assigning more homework, and involves looking at real-life problems, looking into them deeply, asking tough questions, and having high expectations. It's not just about raising the bar, but also providing support so that the higher bar can be cleared.

Strong, consistent adult/student relationships: Middle grades are when students begin making decisions and choices that can have a significant impact over the rest of their lives. By forming a strong relationship with some adults in their lives, students can receive guidance on making these decisions.

Opportunity to explore personal interests: A teacher can recognize an interest that a student might have in addition to academics, but if there is no outlet for that interest, be it a debate team, a band, or a school newspaper, the student will be unable to develop that interest.

Preparation for the next stage of education: Teachers at CRLS are able to tell which school

each student attended prior to CRLS. If this is because of certain deficiencies that each school brings to its students, it may be best to figure out how to eradicate that. This is different than dictating curriculum to teachers (which would be a negative step), but does require thinking things through.

The recommendation is for a hybrid model, with one freestanding middle school for about 450 students. This size will help ensure that teachers can collaborate with each other, and that there can be enough staff for many supplemental activities. There will also be many schools kept at K-8, and a few that shift to K-5. The hope is that this would offer a challenge and an opportunity for all students, and also allow Cambridge to leverage the strengths of the current K-8 model. It would allow the expansion of the arts programs, it would allow for a richer array of foreign languages, and it would allow for resource efficiency within the realm of Special Education. By increasing the uniformity of the pre-high-school experience, it allows high school teachers to move forward and not spend a month getting everyone on the same page. It allows teachers to be in close contact with their colleagues and learn from each other. If the classroom is the most important environment in a student's education, a teacher would be the most important person. Improving the quality of the teachers involves both the hiring practices and the opportunities for professional development. Other strengths of the hybrid model are the ability to take advantage of the economies of scale, as at the moment some schools are too small to operate efficiently. Another strength is that by bringing students together under fewer roofs, after-school activities can be improved and enriched.

It became clear that these recommendations could not be implemented overnight or on the original time-frame. Among the questions raised are long-range budgeting, long-range facilities planning, and controlled choice, which is ensuring that each school contains an appropriate representation of the Cambridge student population. In order to allow more time to consider all these elements, a revised timeline will be presented in May. In the meantime, there are six immediate, short-term actions which can be taken beginning in September.

These six actions begin with fighting the achievement gap. The intent is to raise the achievement of all subgroups, while raising the achievement of the not-as-well-performing subgroups more, relative to the better-performing subgroups. The way to achieve this is by focusing on professional development for teachers in learning about differentiated instruction, which is understanding and incorporating the fact that different people learn differently. There will be collaboration with the teachers union to reorganize the professional development schedules in light of these goals. There will be work on the aligned coherent curriculum. There will be work on the Intensive Studies Program, and thought on whether or not it is effectively serving the student body. There will be focus on out-of-school-time partnerships. These topics will be discussed at the May 4th School Committee meeting.

The purpose is to give families more and better choices about how to provide education for their children. The goal is a strong seven-year strand in which the teachers and the students are working on the same things, not in terms of memorization of facts, but in terms of skills that will serve students in their futures.

Jeff asks Mary to monitor time as he invites questions from the Council. Mary states that there should be another 10 or 15 minutes that are usable.

Eitan Stern-Robins asks how the determination will be made as to which schools will be merging and changing. Jeff asks Eitan how he would do it, and Eitan responds that he would look at the grades earned by the students of each school.

Claude expresses his concern over what happens when the students reach high school. Fatima mentions that currently, the 9th Grade Campus of CRLS feels like one big middle school. Jeff responds that 9th grade is typically a high-school year, and that there are many who enjoy the recent adoption of the 9th Grade Campus as well as many who don't like it.

A representative from YIS expresses his concern that for a student transitioning from grade 5 in a K-5 school to grade 6 in the middle school, the difference in school size might be overwhelming. He shares his observation that upon starting at CRLS, he was overwhelmed by the sudden and dramatic increase in cohort and school size. Jeff responds that part of the idea is to ease this transition by first moving from a small K-5 school to a medium-sized middle school, and then from the middle school to the large high school.

Pasang Lhamo states her approval of the hybrid model. She is concerned, though, on account of her experiences with the merger circa 2005 of the Fitzgerald School and the Peabody School. She recalls that the two communities maintained rivalries after the merger. Jeff responds that issues like these are among those that will have to be worked out. He states that the goal of controlled choice is one of the ways to deal with this problem. He also recalls that he continues to hear feedback from what he terms "The Consolidation" and its effects.

Ramsey wonders if there is an age at which the achievement gap does not exist or is not as profound. Jeff responds that the gap begins right away and continues throughout all years of education.

Another YIS representative asks about the fact that in the high school, there is a well-defined structure regarding which students take which level of classes. Jeff responds that this is an important issue, and that his focus at the moment is on middle grades.

Sunaree Marshall asks if the achievement gap is different from one school in the system to the next, and wonders if larger schools have less of a gap. Jeff responds that because the sample size is so small with some of the smaller schools, it is difficult to gain valuable and insightful data about each individual school. Mayor Maher adds that there are particular schools that are considered quite good within the system, but black males are still not achieving at as high levels even in those schools.

Allentza Michel asks about efforts to engage parents in the process, as the achievement gap could in part be attributed to families who are unable to support their children's educations in the same way. Jeff regrets that Ken Reeves had to leave, as he thinks the Baby University program is making progress in addressing this issue. Mary informs Jeff that Baby U was discussed at the last meeting of the Council. Ellen Semonoff states that Baby U focuses on enlisting parents as their child's first and most important teacher.

Nancy Tauber states how important it is, as a member of the School Committee, to receive feedback from the community. Jeff points out that the school department recognizes that it only has students from 8:00am to 3:00pm, and also that life exists for students after the school day. For this reason, it is important to make sure the schools work with the community in a variety of ways

to improve the overall educational product provided by the community and through the schools. At the same time, the main job of the schools needs to be improving the quality of instruction, as it is on this issue over which the schools have the most control.

Michael, a YIS member, recalls that there isn't much difference in the achievement gap from one age group to another, and wonders, therefore, how the focus of middle grades was chosen for combating this problem. Jeff responds that he was given the mandate upon his hiring to look at the middle grades. He also states that he frequently holds meetings to determine which challenges are best faced by the school department and which are better faced by individual schools.

Sam Seidel wonders how the big-picture questions will reconnect to all of these specific actions. Jeff responds that this is what will be discussed at the May 4th meeting of the School Committee. Sam wonders further if there is a point at which the community can weigh in on all these changes. Jeff responds that there will certainly be many opportunities.

Ellen returns to the issue of parents, and states that partnership is a part of the equation. She relates a program from the previous night which took place at Rindge Towers, involving representatives from the police and from the school department, encouraging parents to attend an international event coming up at CRLS. She thinks this kind of outreach is important to including parents.

Mayor Maher thanks everyone for their questions, and asks the Council to applaud Jeff, which it does. He then moves the Council along to the next item.

F. (returning) Update Report on Youth Involvement Subcommittee (YIS)

Mayor Maher wonders who will be starting the report.

Okey introduces himself as a freshman at CRLS, and Eitan introduces himself as a sophomore at CRLS and as the technician for the report presentation.

Okey introduces the YIS as a youth advocacy group. He mentions that there has been a fall planning retreat, and two resulting projects. One of these was working on the voting age, and the other was respect for cultural diversity. He tells another activity of YIS is annually attending the National League of Cities (NLC) conference. He shares that YIS has representation on the Council's Strategic Plan Outcome Subcommittees. He mentions that Tina Alu has been helping YIS in gaining financial literacy skills.

Abuchi, a junior at CRLS and co-chair of YIS, discusses the voting age project. He mentions that the process has been long and arduous, but rewarding on account of its potential impact. In 2005, he relates, YIS began looking into lowering the voting age from 18 to 17 for local elections. He shares more of the timeline of this project, highlighting a rally at City Hall, various bills filed by Alice Wolf in the Massachusetts General Court, and advice from Representative Cory Atkins of Concord. He also describes some collaboration with the Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC) on this matter. He invites Kenny to continue reporting on the collaboration with BSAC.

Kenny introduces himself as a junior at CRLS. He states the partnership with BSAC has intensified, and points out some of the ways in which BSAC has been helpful to YIS in pursuing

lowering the voting age. He states that the two groups are learning from each other, and feeding off of each others' energy. The voting age project is but one subgroup with members from BSAC and YIS, he notes, and there are meetings every other week with both groups.

Pasang introduces herself as a co-chair of YIS and a junior at CRLS. She is presenting on her subgroup's goal of supporting and enhancing the CRLS motto. She states that her group has collaborated with MIT graduate students in Urban Planning on designing a survey. After conferring with the principal of CRLS, the survey has been distributed and will be collected soon. The next step, she says, is to tally the results and present them to the rest of the school. The goal, she remembers, is see how students from many cultures have been able to represent their culture at CRLS.

Siham introduces herself as a junior at CRLS, and begins to talk about the NLC conference. She relates that nine students were chosen to attend the NLC conference in Washington, DC in March. A group of students (Amber, Dadon, Fatima, Eduardo, Mekides, Michael, Robel) walks the Council through the various elements of the conference. Among the highlights they share are: breakfast with elected officials from across the country, a visit to the National Zoo, breakfast with our City Council, various workshops, and speeches from various officials from within the Obama administration. Ramsey, a sophomore at CRLS, mentions that the delegation met with Congressman Michael Capuano about the voting age effort. Rep. Capuano, she shares, gave the delegation valuable advice on how to proceed in their initiative.

The Council applauds for the YIS presenters.

Mary thanks everyone who has been supporting YIS and their work. She specifically thanks Sunaree Marshall, a graduate student in Urban Studies and Planning at MIT, who has been helping YIS in its goal of understanding cultural diversity at CRLS. Mary also specifically thanks Natalie Nguyen, a volunteer, and Allentza Michel, YIS Youth Engagement Coordinator, for their time and work to chaperone the YIS delegation at the NLC Conference, and Geoff Marietta, who has been helping the Council on its Strategic Plan.

The Council applauds all of these volunteers for their efforts.

Mayor Maher thanks the YIS for their impressive presentation. He is happy to see that Rep. Atkins's advice and Rep. Capuano's advice have been heeded on the youth voting front, and he states his belief that the YIS trip to the NLC Conference is a wonderful opportunity not only to see how the wheels of government turn but also for the YIS and the City Council to meet each other. He also notes the conference took place during an exciting week in Washington, DC with the healthcare debate.

Mayor Maher concludes the meeting at 8:05pm.