

Mountain Park Community Association (MPCA) Meeting with Gwinnett County School Board

March 25, 2021

by Kathy Lobe, for MPCA

Fifty-one members and guests attended the Zoom meeting on March 25, 2021. Guest speakers from Gwinnett County Public School District answered questions submitted from community and MPCA members. Everton Blair, Chairman of the Gwinnett County School Board, who also represents our District 4 Area; Dr. Al Taylor, Interim Associate Superintendent for School Improvement and Operations; and Dr. Clay Hunter, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction answered the many questions submitted, ranging from traffic concerns on Killian Hill Road, to academics, building plans, and the search for a new superintendent. The following is a summary of the session.

Five Year Plan

This term refers to how E-SPLOST funds will be used for building programs. 2021 finishes out plans already underway from the last period; the new one is from 2022-2027. They use many factors to determine new needs in each cluster, especially housing patterns that affect enrollment of school age children. Although the school building department meets with local officials about how new developments will impact the schools and traffic concerns, the school district does not get to approve or deny any development project. If you are concerned about how Gwinnett County Planning and Zoning Board decisions will affect your schools, please become active at the county level, before development occurs, to be involved in the decision stages, know where development is taking place, give input on those decisions *before* your neighborhoods and schools are affected

Redistricting

Redistricting for the entire district is reviewed annually. Before making a decision to rezone school and/or cluster lines, they always look to find a balance, weigh the pros and cons of changes, and look at the long term effects redistricting - or other matters - may have on a school community. Mr. Blair commented it is understandable that people want to know ahead of time when making decisions to move into an area and at this time, there are no Parkview redistricting plans upcoming. Dr. Taylor said there are plans for Trickum Middle building expansion into the paved area in back of the school. Dr. Hunter emphasized that if more students than expected show up, they will be housed and educated utilizing mobile classrooms as they have done in the past until building can be done.

Traffic on Killian Hill Road

During arrival and dismissal times for Trickum Middle concerns are growing. Parents are lining up in the Nantucket neighborhood across the street to pick up their children. The recommendation was made for MPCA and concerned citizens to contact Gwinnett County DOT to make your concerns known about the traffic, the traffic light, and impact on the neighborhood(s) surrounding the school. With your feedback the county and/or city, along with GCPS officials can work to reroute buses and pick up lines, to readjust the traffic flow.

Dyslexia - Multisensory Teaching

Since one in five students have dyslexia, Dr. Hunter explained that Language Arts teachers are being trained in multisensory support for dyslexic learners using the Orton-Gillingham program during staff development sessions. Dyslexic students are not always staffed into special education services, but receive support through a 504 Plan. (An Individualized Education Plan, or IEP, staffs a student into specific special education classes based on their needs. A 504 Plan identifies needs that can be addressed in a regular classroom setting by using beneficial strategies.)

There is also training for all teachers to learn how to write IEPs and 504 Plans since how these plans are written is the key to student success, and includes strategizing with parents for what is best for students, and the importance of in-person learning. Students receiving special education services will also receive assessments and follow up strategies to assist them if learning gaps are identified as they return to school.

Decision Time for In-Person vs. Virtual Learning

The burden for this decision is less than last year, so less time was given for the decision. Parents and students already understand the differences, the pros and cons, between in-person and virtual learning at this decision time. The district needs this information early since they expect a large number of students to return to the classroom, and classrooms need to be organized for safety as well as learning going forward. They also want time to convince parents that students should return to class.

COVID-19 and Transition to In-Person Schooling

Teachers are being given suggestions on how to arrange classrooms and for student movement through the buildings to keep everyone healthy. As mentioned before, teachers will also be using assessment to identify any gaps in learning, to target enrichment and acceleration (preview of the next year's curriculum) for summer learning programs and for when students return in August. Summer programs will address the "whole child" and provide fun and other enriching activities in addition to academic strategies. There is also support in place for teachers to help students who need explicit help and the option of digital learning if the parent chooses that route for next year.

Schools belong to the community, and they want parents and visitors to feel welcome, but they want to keep everyone safe too. They will figure out ways to have visitors and others volunteer; they want to return to 100% in person in the fall, but realize this is a transition period now. They don't make decisions about anything without input, and regularly consult with others about best practices for health and safety.

One question addressed having several delivery methods (programs) for virtual learning. Dr. Hunter reminded us that one common delivery format is the ability of everyone to access the E-Class through the GCPS website. Some teachers are more familiar with one format over other formats, and they've considered the comfort level of teachers during this challenging time, but now there is support for clusters to use one format across the entire

cluster to ease the burden on families who have children in different grade levels and/or at different schools in the cluster.

A FAMILY PROGRAM (to address suicide, violence and gun use/ownership)

Dr. Taylor said they already have age appropriate social and emotional well-being lessons in place that include suicide prevention initiatives, counseling/advisement sessions on overall well being for students. Dr. Hunter shared that the initiatives address challenges of the community in social/emotional development that include the larger community and parents. Mr. Blair said that temporary funding will provide transitional support since returning to full time schooling will impact emotional well being and learning. They will take the idea for a family program from the MPCA question back to the board to discuss..

Diversity and Inclusion in Curriculum

Teachers and administrators are being trained in cultural responsiveness in areas such as empathy, implicit bias, to understand all students and how to use the "whole student" approach in teaching and learning. Ethnic studies will focus on looking at your own and other groups' contributions.

Parents Volunteering More than Money or Supplies - Supporting Academics

Parent support is crucial for student success. Parents can access the AKS at home via the GCPS website, look under the tab "Parents" for information showing how to take the standards and address them at home. Learning can't be done just at school. The district is partnering with groups for tutors. Gwinnett County College (GCC) education students are being trained with lesson plans for summer learning and to extend tutoring into the school year.

Food Program Waste

COVID impacted saving food for later for students to pick up, but they do have on-going food support in place for students in need.

Vendor Selection

GCPS has their procedures available to the public, and a multi layered approach determines vendors who bid to provide services to GCPS.

School Resource Officers (SRO)

Mr. Blair: The school district is not reducing the number of School Resource Officers, but there are no plans to increase them. They are housed in high schools and middle schools, and a few elementary schools. There is a budgetary component that must be considered; the new Superintendent will make recommendations about SROs when creating the budget, and then the school board votes on the recommendation at that time.

Early Departure of Superintendent Wilbanks

Mr. Blair responded that change is unsettling, but this change was already in process anyway by Mr. Wilbanks' announced decision not to renew his contract next year (2022). Parents will make their own decisions about where to live, but the school district continues investing in its teachers and 22,000 other employees (to support student learning). Schools provide an important role in this community and will continue to do so.

Concerns from the recent press release about Superintendent Alvin Wilbanks' early departure from his contract, members were reassured by Mr. Blair that he has enjoyed a good relationship with Mr. Wilbanks, and that the superintendent was present at all of the meetings discussing his already-declared departure in 2022 and the early upcoming departure this summer. He also expressed appreciation for Mr. Wilbanks' many years of service, and gratitude for expressing concerns and input for the transition period to a new superintendent. Mr. Blair is confident that the school district will be successful in its renewal of its state accreditation as it has many times in the past.

The search for a new superintendent will include a national search. Community input with surveys for leadership qualities will be sought. They predict it will take about four months. Some of the qualities they are looking at include someone who is good at community engagement; focus on workforce development and exposure for students; social and emotional learning, including interventions; proactive. Supporting all clusters throughout the various district clusters so that people are just as excited about living and learning in any area of Gwinnett.

Get Involved with your Board of Education

Prior to the meeting's conclusion, Board Chairman Everton Blair invited and encouraged everyone to please attend the monthly Board of Education meetings to be aware of concerns in the district, their decisions, and to stay in contact with their board representatives to make their concerns known.

[Click Here](#) if you want to view the recorded meeting.