

ACCESS Academy – Notes from Principal’s Coffee

Friday, April 6, 2018, 8:50 a.m., Rose City Park School (RCP) auditorium

Attendance: approx. 68

Principal Anh Nguyen-Johnson began the meeting by acknowledging that everyone at ACCESS has questions and concerns about how ACCESS will function next school year and beyond. She presented two speakers from the District who would address those concerns and update the community on the newly-formed ACCESS Advisory Committee (AAC):

Stephanie Cameron, Senior Director of Communications & Public Affairs, and

Stephanie Soden, Chief of Staff to PPS Superintendent Guadalupe Guerrero.

[Cameron Vaughan, Manager, Strategic Partner Outreach and Development, Communications and Public Affairs, was unable to join today’s meeting.]

Stephanie S. introduced herself. Having joined the District in Jan 2018, she is quickly getting up to speed on issues of ACCESS’s location, both long- and short-term. As Chief of Staff to the Superintendent, she sees one of her roles as supporting Stephanie C.

Stephanie C. introduced herself. She joined PPS this March 1st after being recruited by Stephanie S. They have worked successfully together previously elsewhere and, given the recent change of PPS leadership, are enthusiastic to devote their efforts to now rebuilding communications and public engagement in the District. As an outsider to PPS, she (along with many other longtime observers) has easily seen the need for PPS to get things right. She is bringing herself up to speed.

Stephanie C. explained that Dr. Yvonne Curtis is the new Deputy Superintendent. She has been named the “Project Sponsor” or “Executive Sponsor” in charge of finding a home for ACCESS. Both Stephanies and Dr. Curtis acknowledge that they “have been given an extremely compressed timeline to do so.”

Stephanie C. has met with members of the ACCESS Campaign Team, Principal Anh, teachers and parent representatives, and with members of the newly-formed ACCESS Advisory Committee (AAC), to engage all participants, gather information, begin planning, and effectively communicate any developments.

The new AAC met Monday, April 2nd and is, meeting again this afternoon. The purpose of the Committee is to give voice to stakeholders involved in the move of ACCESS to a new site – the staff & faculty of any other school that may be affected, as well as all ACCESS community members.

The Advisory Committee’s focus is on a short-term solution; however, the AAC will stay in position for long-term planning and to focus the future permanent plan for ACCESS. Next school year is the Committee’s focus. Stephanie C. said some new ideas have come out of this new team, and that she welcomes feedback. She is in the process of tracking, responding to, and indexing all the questions that have been brought to her attention. She encouraged us to channel ideas to the AAC, the PTA or to her directly (email at scameron1@pps.net).

A parent asked: Are the Superintendent and Board committed to coming up with a solution? What is the probability that they will NOT do so? In response, Stephanie said she couldn’t predict a number but, in her opinion, “the Superintendent wouldn’t allow that [no solution] to happen. ACCESS is not being eliminated.”

A parent asked: Are they committed to a single home for ACCESS?

Stephanie C. replied: The community's voice that "a single site is most optimal has been heard loud and clear." She said they are looking for a single site but expect that the outcome of that search will be that they will come back to the community with a list of single-site options and tell us why they are not available for the short term. They are planning for no more than two sites for next year. They have registered the preference that, if the school is divided, then Middle School grades will be co-located at an MS-level school rather than at a K-5 school.

A parent asked: If there are two sites, then how will walk-to-math work? For example, how will 4th graders take 8th-grade math? Students would lose learning time if they had to be transported between campuses. Response: The walk-to-math program is one criterion to be resolved, along with transportation time. Principal Anh added that she has made clear the need of having a teacher (or two or three) at each site who could teach higher level math, so that kids wouldn't have to move during the school day. (Teachers might also be reluctant to shuttle between two sites.) Anh emphasized that we need someone accessible onsite to provide the needed services. She has communicated those needs to the ACCESS Advisory Committee and to the Stephanies in previous meetings. Anh said that we have to find a location (or locations), then figure out the staffing needed for them.

A 6th grader's parent expressed: Our community is aware that few options are available. We recognize others' needs. The reality is that, for too long, ACCESS has been treated as an afterthought. PPS should "flip the assumption." The assumption should be that there will continue to be one location for ACCESS. Tough decisions are needed to prioritize the one location solution for ACCESS. Kairos Charter School's immediate needs were considered, so were Pioneer's; PPS decided to sell Washington High School and made other short-sighted decisions. When is enough enough?

Stephanie C. responded that she has spoken to the ACCESS Campaign Team and AAC. Dr. Curtis is learning what is good for the program. She is learning how to serve all programs in district. If two sites are needed for the next school year, that arrangement "will be for the short term."

What, asked a parent, is a so-called short-term solution? ACCESS at Sabin was touted as a short-term solution; it lasted 10 years. Rose City Park was to have been a short-term solution; this is ACCESS's fifth year at RCP. PPS needs to make its commitments clear and meaningful. If the school is split to two sites for next year, then it must be for 2018-19 ONLY, with demonstrable progress continuing nonstop toward finding the next year's solution.

A parent suggested that the notion that PPS could staff two sites for ACCESS is patently absurd. It would be even more complicated than staffing the current one-site program, which already struggles every year to juggle its staffing plan.

One of the Stephanies asked: What would ensure confidence? A written assurance that this would indeed be a short-term arrangement and that PPS would follow through on its commitments?

A parent responded: The long-term plan must be connected to the short-term solution. ACCESS will accept the short-term solution only if the long-term commitment is made also. Commitment to

both plans should be announced at the same time. To do otherwise would land the District, and ACCESS, back again in the same situation, without a plan, next April. The plan for next year must be made integral to the plan for the following year(s).

A parent asked: What would we REALLY need to be able to operate as a split campus? A split campus for this program for highly gifted education is far from optimal: the depth of the difficulties in making it work is acutely understood by the parent community and many teachers here but is not yet appreciated by PPS -- even Anh is new to the program this year. No one outside of this building is trained for this program and none receive special training to teach highly gifted children.

The parent recommended that the Stephanies view the video produced for the Superintendent, if they have not already done so. It helps illustrate the crucial fact that ACCESS is not just about teaching TAG kids! ACCESS is designed to meet those testing at 99% and above at their rate & level, while taking into account their various overexcitabilities, and learning issues as well. These children need to be in a class that is the right level and rate and provides social and peer support. Teachers "inherited" from outside the ACCESS program do not understand these kids' needs. All who work with this program need training and experience with this specialized population, teacher, staff, and administrators alike, and administrators must be able to advocate for it. A 3rd grader can't sit in a class with 10th graders; that student needs PEERS.

The parent pointed out that even if PPS were to locate two sites for ACCESS for fall 2018, there are simply not enough teachers, staff, and administrators to be divided to populate two sites! TAGAC is working to improve training for TAG education, district-wide, but there are insufficient people available to meet even the current need.

A parent pointed out that if ACCESS is co-located with another program, then ACCESS must have its own on-site administrator; otherwise ACCESS will fail. Anh responded that an on-site administrator is on the list of criteria requested of and submitted to the District.

Stephanie C. reported that she, Jennifer Ellis & Maxine visited with Stephanie to convey many of the community's concerns with staffing and timeline. Stephanie will have a web page where all that information will be posted.

Stephanie C. reminded the group of the hard constraints: time, permitting, the PAT teacher contract, limits on the number of trained teachers available. A parent observed that ACCESS families are aware it is "hard," noting during this year alone ACCESS's entire Grade 1/2 class of kids had suffered through a bad teaching assignment process.

A parent asked: What is PPS doing to work with the City to solve the problem? Our public school children need a building for an education.

Stephanie S answered: They went through this process just recently with the (now) discarded proposal to move Pioneer to a new site. They met with the head of the City's Bureau of Development Services and were told in no uncertain terms that BDS would be granting no waivers or conditional use permits outside of their regular process and schedule. They explained that dealing with different buildings of different ages and conditions requires a "long process." Stephanie C. said that PPS was in the preliminary stages of getting the schools exempted from this

constrained process for the future but, for now, the Head of Development Services said “NO, you [schools] have to go through the process.

A parent proposed that the Superintendent get the City to override the regulations regarding moving kids into existing buildings, and regarding adding portable classroom units, knowing that this is a highly politicized issue.

A member of the Campaign Team, speaking as an individual, said that in their opinion PPS could and should commit now to FTE (full time equivalent teaching positions) and other community needs, and not focus solely on a building. The sooner PPS states its commitments to the ACCESS program the better. Other than talk about a possible site (or two), PPS has articulated no other specific supports for the ACCESS program.

Another parent reinforced the view that PPS needs to make commitments to students -- commitments to their education. Suggestion: have PPS hire consultants or experts to provide teachers with the specialized training they need to work with this population, and to make sure the District's TAG TOSAs (Teachers on Special Assignment) know how the TAG system works! Children don't have a right to a specific building, but they do have a right to be taught at their rate and level. ACCESS's students need teachers and administrators knowledgeable about and experienced with highly gifted and twice-exceptional 99 percenters. Work-arounds are needed to deal with some problematic issues inherent in automatic teacher assignment and seniority.

A parent acknowledged that even at ACCESS which has, for the most part, tremendously experienced, knowledgeable teachers, there are gaps: education at rate and level is not always consistently delivered. But the benefits of being at ACCESS are huge, and for most families, can be found nowhere else. The parent said that what people come to ACCESS for -- and what keeps their family at ACCESS -- is the existence of a real peer group for their child. In order to have the best chance of learning at their rate and level, children in this population need to be with their peers. Stephanie S. says Dr. Curtis understands that need we should channel our messages to her.

Stephanie C. said that Dr. Curtis is visiting numerous buildings to learn how the schools are actually using their rooms. She cautioned us that PPS is being very careful about how it rolls out information about possible colocation sites. She knows that ACCESS was left as the villain in previous scenarios. She recognized that PPS will need to commit to ongoing support of the ACCESS community “through what is likely to be two moves.”

A parent asked: “What is the lead time to open a new building?” Stephanie said that no “new” building is being looked at for the short term; for the long term a new construction bond would be needed. There are a few buildings that PPS owns that are not currently being used by the district, but there is currently no timeline for getting them back into PPS use.

A parent addressed the Program/School dichotomy. Having recently joined ACCESS, their family was appalled to learn that, as a program, ACCESS (like the Pioneer program and unlike a “school”) could be “instantly dissolved,” without any board decision or prior communication. This parent said they (like many other ACCESS parents) had fought for their kid, who had no option remaining except ACCESS. Now here, the family has observed the adverse and unrelenting social-emotional impacts on students of this year's acute uncertainty about ACCESS. The parent pointed out that

the kids noticed when crews came through their classrooms to measure for next year's scheduled occupants, and they are stressed knowing they are being displaced with nowhere to go next year.

A parent told the Stephanies that PPS would earn trust by establishing and publicizing an explicit timeline – for child care, transportation, staffing, etc., for both the short term and long-term plans. Answer the question: “What is the timeline? What is the project plan?”

Stephanie C. responded that the AAC will get that timeline out there. How it will be implemented is to be determined but, she said, the Superintendent's goal is to deliver a spectrum of services to the District's TAG population, not just a building.

A parent continued: What the Superintendent needs to do is clearly articulate what he and the District are doing now, and what services will be delivered, so that current – and prospective – ACCESS parents can understand what's actually happening and share that information with their kids.

Stephanie S. reported that at Monday's AAC meeting she heard important concerns were expressed about the upcoming school Auction, current and future enrollment, admissions, and the need for outreach to prospective students.

A parent suggested that what the District needed to do (among other things) was to fix the application and enrollment process. It seems to have been designed to discourage interest in the program, screen OUT rather than identify candidates for admission, and magnify barriers to historically underserved students, and discredit demand for the program. Another thing: the District needs to make a strong public statement in support of ACCESS, saying (among other things) that the program is here to stay for long term, that there are spaces available and that application are encouraged. PPS, on its web pages, needs to include complete and accurate information about ACCESS. PPS must take every opportunity to publicize ACCESS's important role within PPS.

A parent pointed out that some two years ago PPS's own Teaching and Learning Committee voted to expand ACCESS's enrollment to 550 students (to meet the then-documented demand). PPS staff then proceeded to shut down all efforts to follow up on that directive. Stephanie responded that Dr. Curtis acknowledges that ACCESS is not a substitute for neighborhood schools' TAG programs but is complementary to them.

A parent pointed out that PPS needs to resume and complete the district-wide boundary review, to help schools including MLK, Sabin, Vestal, and more.

A parent said that a statement from Mayor Wheeler, in support of ACCESS, is needed. She noted that the Mayor (and elected official Tina Kotek) spoke out in the press about the importance of Kairos and its need for a building, but has not said anything about the importance of ACCESS. The parent observed (to grim laughter) that the Mayor was “generous with PPS buildings.”

A parent suggested PPS get outside consultants experienced with planning and managing quick moves, to help mitigate risks of failure – or, at the very least, recruit from within their best experts, to build a strong roll-out team within PPS.

Stephanie responded that she is working with experts from departments across PPS. She suggested that they are developing a publicly-accessible “decision log” to document decisions made.

Jennifer Ellis added that the Campaign Team is pushing to see if PPS has a policy on how it assigns buildings. For example, there are programs of “wants” (Focus Option schools) and programs of need (e.g., ACCESS, Alliance). PPS needs to follow a clear, consistent policy.

A parent raised the issue of how ACCESS families are viewed, and treated, outside of ACCESS. This parent finds herself having to “put her head down” to say her kid goes to ACCESS. Anyone reading media sees we are unvalued. We are seen as a school of little need and much privilege. ACCESS families are called racist, elitist. Families are vilified. It’s commonly misperceived that ACCESS is “the school where white ‘Aspy’ boys go.” That it’s that school for “smart white kids.” That kids of color are not represented or welcome at ACCESS. It has been this way for a long time. This year it got much worse as escalating blame for many of the District’s failings was funneled onto ACCESS.

Stephanie C. said she sees how the “villainization” has happened. Numerous parents chimed in that they have personally encountered friends and neighbors (in addition to perfect strangers) telling them that ACCESS is “an awful place,” “messed up,” no place they would ever want to send their children. The depth of hatred directed at the ACCESS community has been shocking to many. A parent pointed out that even the visit to ACCESS today by the Stephanies will likely be used as ammunition against ACCESS – some will again claim that ACCESS is being given undue attention and consideration compared to other school communities in need.

Stephanie C. said she is also tasked to meet with Pioneer to establish improved communication protocols and repair the damage done there and that she will do so.

A parent, a 12-year ACCESS veteran, spoke in support of ACCESS and Anh as principal, saying that changes must be put in place immediately; otherwise, staffing for the upcoming year will remain indeterminate. The parent implored PPS: Do not wait for all pieces of the puzzle to come into place before announcing progress; essential decisions must be made even if information is incomplete. Progress updates, however incremental, should be issued frequently.

Regarding the plans for current staffing in Grade 1/2, Anh updated the group that she will have information to share with the community after a meeting she is attending today.

In closing, Stephanie C. encouraged those who were able to remain after the meeting and speak to her and Stephanie S.

The Principal’s Coffee concluded at 9:50 a.m.

Notes compiled by Lisa Karplus, Secretary of the Meeting