

Minutes of the February 2005 Meeting of the Cleveland Park Citizens Association

Meeting Date: Saturday, February 5, 2005
Location: Cleveland Park Library
3310 Connecticut Avenue, NW; Washington, DC

Cleveland Park Citizens Association (CPCA) President George Idelson called the meeting to order at 6:35 p.m. 82 persons are listed on the attendance sheet, of whom 35 were members.

I. Announcement

Barbara Beelar, co-chair of the Hearst Recreation Council, reported that the Council is working with the DC Public Schools to improve the recreation facilities at Hearst Elementary School. She asked for volunteers for the project.

II. Main Program: A World Class Public School System – What Will It Take?

Mr. Idelson introduced the panel of speakers he described as three legs of the school system: Kathy Patterson, chair for Education on the DC Council; Victor Reinoso, newly elected member for District III on the DC Board of Education; and Dr. Clifford Janey, recently appointed DC Superintendent of Schools.

Superintendent Dr. Clifford Janey: His premise was that there are two levels of disfunctionality within the system, one at the District level, and the other at the school level. At the latter, he recognized four classes of performance:

1. Schools that perform quite well, and have a good theory of action
2. Schools that have yet to make progress, but have a good theory of action. It is just a matter of time for them to succeed.
3. Schools that are getting results, but do not know why. Without a theory of action, they celebrate results much too early.
4. Schools where performance is quite discouraging. They do not get results, and do not have a clue as to why.

He wants a program for all four sets, working on the schools that are not performing while giving full recognition to schools that have earned the right to flexibility.

In about 60 days he hopes to introduce credit card accounting for individual schools to provide more procurement flexibility to principals. Dr. Janey's most interesting goal is to present for Board of Education consideration a system based on a standard high school program that will allow students to graduate in three, four, or five years. It is a system he introduced in Rochester after vetting it thoroughly with local focus groups. He learned that some students can finish the standard four-year course in three years, but are not yet ready for college. For these students he provided a fourth year with internships and advanced placement courses. The decision on working toward the three-, four-, or five-year track will come in the sophomore year.

He is also working on a "buy back policy" for "in-school dropouts." The present policy records a student who misses seven days in a given reporting period as having failed. That means that if a student misses seven of the first ten days of a period, there is then no incentive to come back that period. Now the school will work out "contracts" that allow students to make up the work they missed and "buy back" some of the lost days.

Dr. Janey closed by saying that we need programs that are not only proclaimed, but are widely "owned" by the stakeholders. "Education cannot be everybody's business but my job."

[Laughter.]

Kathy Patterson was pleased to be chairing at last the Council committee that she really wanted (Education) after ten years service on the DC Council. The system needs stability and accountability. It is good news that Janey has resolved to be here for a long time. She sees the Board of Education as the policy-making body. The Council's role is to control the budget, and provide statutory definitions. It must also find a better way to address the facilities issue. Finally, it has continuing oversight on police, safety, welfare, and recreational issues that impact the schools so heavily.

Victor Reinoso agreed with the need for stability and accountability. The Board should provide disciplined oversight and is determining that contracts are competitively bid. He complimented the Superintendent for his energy which was beginning to show results in developing standards, moving away from late hiring of teachers, giving schools their budgets for the following year in February, working on procurement, and concentrating on early literacy programs. Mr. Reinoso is developing relationships with Kathy Patterson and Adrian Fenty on the Council, and with members of the Mayor's staff so that when an emergency comes up he will have smooth working relations with people who know him.

He urged citizens to watch Channel 20 which covers Board of Education meetings, and cited the program on which the DC School's Chief Financial Officer reported that overspending had already reached 30 million dollars. This figure is symptomatic of a poor internal financial controls. Dr. Janey likened the problem to repairing an aircraft in mid flight, or perhaps building a new aircraft while in flight, while moving the passengers from the old to the new. [Laughter.]

He observed that innovation is sometimes perceived to be the role of charter schools. A handful of charter schools are excellent schools, but many are not. Innovation should be pervasive in all DC public schools.

III. Questions and Comments

There followed a lively discussion, as illustrated by the following questions and comments:

Emily DeCicco: Noncharter schools should have the opportunity to innovate.

Debra Jane Lindeman: We need a host of incentives for teachers to live in DC, e.g., allowing them to teach in schools near their residences.

Pete MacDonald: The big problem is getting parents involved.

Emily Washington was asked by Dr. Janey to report on a project to involve parents in schools. They can be reached, but she wants to be sure that teachers are doing their jobs.

Roger Myers: This panel discussion is great; it provides the kind of energy we need. Yes, parental involvement is important, but we would not have so many kids or parents with problems if we did not have so many unwanted children. He offered a pamphlet on the subject.

Bruce Beckner: How can we address the various problems in the school system? Dr. Janey was dismissive of people who come in with what he called tin cup solutions, requiring money the school system does not have. Instead he is creating a division of Community Partnership to which people can bring information on how they had achieved change.

Dorothy M_____, who works with a school music group that has reached 12,000 students in some 50 schools, asked about opening schools in the evenings and weekends, adding adult education, and discouraging youth violence by supporting school bands.

Charles Briody: His group is organizing a group to visit Cuba to study how that country has raised literacy rates. Can he contact the staff of the panelists about participating in the visit? Dr. Janey and Mr. Reinoso responded "Yes."

Bob Brandon. He has taught baseball to boys and girls in the DC Schools, and can echo what Ms. Washington said about parents being desperate to help their kids.

Sally Schwartz: We need to work with residents across the city to form a compact that pulls parents together. Is this happening?

Jamila Booker: Where are we now on school budgets?

Ann Loikow: What is being proposed in sports funding for area schools?

VI. Adjournment

The President adjourned the meeting at 12:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Gregory R. New and George Idelson