

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

Meeting Date: Saturday, November 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 10:20 a.m. 52 persons signed the attendance sheet; 21 indicated that they were members.

I. Announcements

Bill Mitchell, a director of Retired Scientists, Engineers, and Technicians, invited retired professionals to volunteer to teach in public elementary schools to spark interest in science, mathematics, and technology. Volunteers, who give six one-hour lessons followed by field trips, are currently 24 working in five schools, including Adams, Orr and Shepherd in DC.

Dean Neilson introduced a petition urging the director of the Department of Parks and Recreation to implement full funding of a stalled proposal for restoration of the Hearst playground. He explained that Phase I was overspent and he fears downsizing of the rest of the project.

II. Report on Superintendent Janey's First Year in the DC Public Schools

Mr. Idelson introduced Superintendent of Schools **Dr. Clifford Janey** and two respondents: Council Member Kathy Patterson (Education Chair) and Board Member (Ward 3-4) Victor Reinoso. Dr. Janey said that he was comfortable with progress to date, but realizes formidable challenges remain.

He has visited 75 schools in eight months. He gives priority to secondary schools, and has served as "principal for a day" in six senior high schools. He is moving down through middle and junior high schools to the elementary schools. He intends to focus on what we need from high schools, especially the need to emphasize social as well as academic abilities.

Dr. Janey offered copies of "Declaration of Education; Keeping Our Promise to the District's Children" that he had issued as a strategic plan in May 2005, and spoke of its three goals. For every classroom in every school, they:

1. Provide high-quality teaching and learning;
2. Ensure management and operations that support high-quality teaching and learning;
3. Create a culture of transparency, open communication, and collaboration that supports high-quality teaching and learning

His e-mail traffic had been extraordinary just before he took the job. There were 10,000 individuals with some level of rightful grievance. Some 25 million dollars was paid out to make good, and gain educational credibility.

Dr. Janey said all efforts, including passing the billion dollar facilities modernization bill, must meet objectives, sustain academic programs, effective management, and communication with the public. Procurement hurdles must be overcome. As examples of progress, he said that 80% of principals had been hired by August 2005 vs. 23% by August 2005. This year, some 85% of teachers had been hired by orientation time (August 29), 15% above the goal of 70%. He is also focused on filling ancillary positions such as custodians and assistant principals.

Challenges remain in hiring for special education. There is a problem of high demand and low supply. A high rate of referrals to special education leads to extraordinary expenses, e.g., \$18,000 per student for transportation alone. There is also a high level of hearing requests, and a higher level of appeals than California, Texas, and New York combined. We are fortunately poised to have all Blackman cases combined into one class action case.

Academically, two additional elementary schools meet graduation requirements, but six secondary schools still don't. Improvement is only marginal on the national assessment.

There was an embarrassing loss of high school principals (almost a third) from retirement, transfer, or for cause. In part, the turnover reflects the fact that not many are waiting in the wings for leadership positions.

DC schools are receiving challenge grants from the business community to fund 100 new national board certified teachers per year. ~~Realizing~~ **Dr. Janey said he realized** such a goal will be an extraordinary achievement. Such certified teachers regularly outperform regular teachers, and increase learning by the equivalent of one week per year. DC now facilitates high-volume, low value purchasing by allowing principals to use American Express credit cards, thus expediting the heavy work of opening schools on time. Lack of full automation remains a hurdle.

Despite "painful gaps and holes", there are little bumps of progress, such as a gain in advanced placement students. Belief in progress is no longer an act of faith, but a collective effort is required to achieve it.

Mr. Idelson asked what grade Dr. Janey would assign to his accomplishments. The answer: perhaps a D, citing continued contracting problems at particular schools

Kathy Patterson responded by saying that part of the problem is to convince people that progress is being made. Between February and September the system leapfrogged the learning standards issue by adopting Massachusetts standards. This was an extraordinary step, she said, but was not well publicized. When parents complain about classrooms with leaky roofs and "two temperatures, 30 degrees and 100 degrees," it is hard in such situations to make a case for academic standards.

Ms. Patterson believes we are on the right track. We have decided to have a policy-making Board of Education, and should respect and work with it. Once Dr. Janey bought into the new fiscal package, the parties were able to work together. We need to demand continued improvement.

Mr. Idelson asked about the proposed billion-dollar modernization bill. Ms. Patterson explained that it dedicates a hundred million dollars a year for ten years to facilities improvement. There is still disagreement over stable funding sources, but a general acceptance that a main ingredient calls for keeping the income tax rate at 8.5% instead of letting it drop to 8%. There is a useful conversation with the business community over other parts of it. She hopes to move a new bill to the full Council by the end of the year.

Victor Reinoso said it is time to speak of improvement in the schools, even though, among his immediate neighbors, more still move out of public schools than in.

Mr. Reinoso reported that an arrangement had been made with the DC Inspector General to conduct an internal audit of the public schools. We need the transparency of an audit to see where breakdowns have taken place. There had been progress in answering parents' complaints, but we need a better system, one not focusing on crises. We are doing a better job of collecting data on performance, e.g., a uniform calculation of the graduation rate. In the past, the calculation has differed from year to year.

We need progress on facilities, special education, and communicating with the business community. Fortunately, the school system is now willing to accept help. For example, we accepted the best learning standards instead of trying to devise our own. We must work on contracts to get schools repaired correctly, instead of finding that roofs of new buildings leak. We also have excess space of millions of square feet as the enrolment dropped 25,000 during ten years when no schools have been closed. The excess space has tremendous implications on per-student expenditures.

Mr. Reinoso closed by announcing a community meeting at Janey School on November 17, 6:30 to 8:30 pm. At 4-6 pm. the same day there will be a hearing on charter schools.

Q&A

Someone asked about the impact of the proliferation of charter schools. Dr. Janey answered that the conversation on charter schools has been unintentionally narrow. It has focused on growth rather than performance, on proposed benefits, not on actual benefits. The schools have different ethnic diversity, so cannot be compared solely by achievement levels.

Mr. Idelson asked if charter schools were a plus or a minus, on the whole. Are they competitive? Dr. Janey answered, "Yes, and I like competition." Parents need a choice, but a choice of quality. We cannot assume that because you are different, you are better.

Mr. Reinoso added that most choices seem to be negative. Thus they are not competitive in that sense, even if some charter schools are performing splendidly. The new school you pick may actually be no better than the public school you left. Dr. Janey added that charter schools are less accountable, because they are less public. But the superintendent and board do have a say on standards. Ms. Patterson suggested that some charter schools are serving a need that regular public schools are not meeting. For example, some charter schools are doing a very good job serving troubled kids.

Pete MacDonald asked about the dropout rate. Something like 30 or 40% of the students do not graduate. What can or should be done? Dr. Janey replied, that is one of the essential questions. The rates are embarrassingly large, over 40% if we count from the start of 9th grade to the end of 12th grade. There are faces to these numbers. There are several indicators: Dropouts tend to be struggling learners, especially struggling readers. Many are over-age students. They tend to be involved in factors outside schools. They are often in court, and have a host of family issues.

Consider a student in the 9th grade and two years behind, he said. We could be more flexible, providing schedules that allow some students to finish a year ahead of time, and others to finish in five years. Instead of our 9th grader becoming an in-school dropout, he graduates on a schedule. We could offer a summer semester so that failure could be remedied instead of being a slap in the face. Also, there must be something there when

you graduate. In spite of what some people assume, 90% of students want rigorous learning standards, and challenging learning enrichments. Students must be able to see light at the end of the tunnel. Dr. Janey said he would offer a proposal to the board addressing that issue.

Ms. Patterson added that students need mentors. Give kids another grownup to interact with, especially at the junior high level. Mr. Reinoso seconded the idea. Also, we do not have a reliable way to determine how many are behind level before the 3rd grade test. We need to know where students are at the end of the first grade. Mr. Idelson added that CPCA is ready to continue to offer a platform for highlighting the issues.

Peter Espenschied observed that for some dropouts there is a relationship between the lack of a goal and dropping out. The lack of vocational high schools means they may not have a job when they graduate. Surely some would find vocational education more useful than an academic one. Dr. Janey agreed this was a very timely question. We had vocational schools, and they were shut down. There ought not be this dichotomy between going for a job and going to college. His own kids run the range: teacher, lawyer, mechanic, entrepreneur, and a quality carpenter who made \$85,000 a year job right out of high school.

Gregory New mentioned the petition in support of career and technical education sponsored by the DC Federation of Civic Associations. He will bring it before the executive committee, and hopes it will be approved for circulation at the next meeting.

Dr. Janey observed that Howard University must go to Nigeria to get enough students for its nursing program. He likes the idea of a vocational program where the students can see the connection between what they are learning and the skills needed for work.

Someone mentioned visiting a student in a classroom where a window was broken. Schools must be able to get small repairs done at the school level.

A teacher from Oyster Bilingual School lamented that students were not allowed to have bilingual textbooks. She cited seven broken air conditioners that were replaced by four, only two of which worked. She has asthma, and the heat make her sick, but she cannot get sick leave when it does. .

A woman asked if there is anything on special education to take people out of regular schools. Dr. Janey said we must respond sooner to early indicators of educational problems to avoid escalation. He asked the woman if she could frame suggestions on addressing early warning signs. Mr. Idelson suggested a hot line.

Ana Aldama, a graduate of Wilson High, wondered if the dropout problem were related to the busing issue. Dr. Janey did not ~~thing~~ think so, but said busing might contribute to truancy.

Mr. Espenschied quoted a comment of Dr. Janey that “it was not a money problem,” and cited incompetent repairs as a signal example. Dr. Janey said incompetent contractors are no longer rehired.

Sally MacDonald said that failure to pay on time keeps good teachers out of the system. She observed that language skills by public school graduates were declining rapidly. She added that UDC was committed to vocational education, but that DC had not seized the

opportunity. Ms. Patterson commented that payroll problems had been resolved. Dr. Janey added that less than ten people did not get their pay last September.

III. Closing and Adjournment

Mr. Idelson announced that the next meeting will be in the evening of December 6 and will feature coping high heating costs.

The meeting adjourned at 12:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Gregory R. New and George Idelson