

JGHS PC – Chair's annual report – 2015-16

25th October 2016

This is my fourth and final annual report, as my term as PC Chair has come to an end. In the past year, we have seen the final stages of two key issues that have occupied us over previous years: the rebuild/decant/new school, and the final changeover to the new exams in the Curriculum for Excellence. The Parent Council has continued to support parents and work with the school in both of these areas. In addition, the PC has been involved in discussions with the Council over rising rolls and potential future capacity issues. Finally, there has been more focus than ever on Council budget cuts, and the Parent Council has been active in engaging with the Council over these. Parents have additionally been active in fund-raising to try to mitigate some of the effects of these.

Rebuild

When I first started a PC Chair 4 years ago, we were in completely different buildings, none of which are standing now, and all of which have been replaced by the splendid buildings you now see. For most of the past year we were in Phase 2 of the decant, with the ongoing use of Darroch, and Meadowbank, while settling into the Malala building. We have now received full handover of all of our new buildings, and many parents attended a tour of these at our last PC meeting. Feedback appears to have been very positive, and to date, only a few minor snags have been reported to the PC. We were additionally required to accommodate pupils from Craigmount High at Darroch while their own school was being safety-checked and repaired. We would like to thank all staff for their efforts in getting us up and running in the new buildings as smoothly as possible.

Curriculum for Excellence

There has been ongoing input from parents on the curriculum, and with all subjects now migrated to the new syllabus and exams, we have had no further issues reported around this transition, that caused concerns in previous years. However, we were pleased to note once again the excellent results achieved by pupils, in spite of the disruption caused by the rebuild and decant, and are grateful to the staff for their hard work in helping to achieve this. There will be more on the exam results as a separate agenda item later.

Specific topics discussed in the past year have included presentations on the English curriculum and how this is taught; the Science curriculum, and the Modern Languages curriculum, including the new approach recommended by Education Scotland for introducing a 3rd language. The format of covering a particular subject at each PC meeting has generally been found to be useful by parents, and the PC plans to continue this approach on a rolling basis.

Capacity issues

We have been aware for some time that the school is facing a situation of rising rolls, and projections suggest this will continue over the coming years. This is a wider issue, and secondary head teachers have been advised by the Council that the City of Edinburgh as a whole is expected to be short of 2 high schools by around 2022. In March, it came as a shock to many when Council suggested that there may not be capacity to accommodate all of this year's JGHS S1 intake, and pupils would be prioritised based on geographic distance from the school. This caused considerable consternation, as the pupils were at the time midway through their transition, and concerns were also raised by the PCs of all of the cluster primaries. The PC and many parents wrote to the Council to express their concerns. Further discussions were held between the Council and the school, and it was found that it would in fact be possible to accommodate all of the pupils. As the numbers turned out, it was not necessary to increase capacity from its current 220. Following this, the Council convened a short-term working group, involving the PCs of JGHS and all of its cluster primaries, as well as a number of Councillors and officials, to review longer term options. There was no appetite for reviewing catchment boundaries, which would in any case simply shift the problem, with all high

schools forecast to be full within the next few years. There is not expected to be a numbers issue in the immediate future, but the PC expects to be fully engaged in any further discussions on this topic. We would like to thank all parents who wrote to Councillors on this issue.

Council budget

Parents will be well aware that we are operating within the wider context of financial cuts at the Council level. The Council is in the situation of increasing demands, due to both an aging population and also a rise in the birth rate, making demands on services at both ends of the age spectrum, but having a fixed income due the Council tax freeze. Schools have had some protection from cuts, but some potentially damaging cuts were proposed. Of particular concern was a proposal to introduce charges for music instrumental lessons, about which the PC and many individual parents wrote to the Council, as well as this becoming a major public campaign, with support from Tommy Smith and Nicola Benedetti. We were delighted to hear that the Council decided to reverse this proposed cut, and it was commented that JGHS parents had been particularly strong in voicing opposition. We would like to thank all the parents who wrote on this issue, and this demonstrates that writing to Councillors does have an impact.

There will be a Council budget meeting later in the year for the coming year's budget, which is likely to result in fresh proposals for cuts. As the Parent Council, we will need to focus on priorities and try to protect the school from the most damaging cuts, and mitigate the impact as far as possible.

Acknowledgements

It remains only to thank the many people who have done so much to support the PC and the school community. Our outgoing Secretary, Alison MacLeod, and Communications rep, Lucy Norris, have both worked very hard as committee members over several years. Thanks to our Treasurer, Julie-Ann Sime, who has diligently looked after our finances, including the Small Funds allocation. Funds raised by the PC are used to support small requests for funding from school departments and groups, for which you can see details on the PC website of the Small Funds allocation. Thanks too to committee members Ailsa MacIntosh and Anna Christal, who have provided invaluable support and picked up a whole range of different tasks over the past year.

Our fantastic Events team of Karen Finlayson and Sheila Shields have arranged a number of fund-raising events and sold refreshments at school events. Our warmest thanks go to Karen and Sheila and their team of volunteer helpers.

We can all also raise funds through Easy Fundraising, where parents shop online at major retailers, and a proportion of every payment goes to JGHS funds. With only a fairly small number of participants, we raised £437, and we would encourage parents to sign up – it costs nothing. Our thanks go to Amelia Beattie for setting this up. Another parent, Carol Phillip, set us up with Sainsbury's Active Kids, which has enabled the PE department to buy a range of equipment that would not otherwise have been possible. We would like to thank Carol and all the parents who collected vouchers for us, and would encourage everyone to do so again when the scheme re-opens this year. Thanks also to Alison Platts for her work in supporting the school's successful Community Sports Hub application, which has been a great team effort.

Our warmest thanks go to Donald and Ian for loyally attending and providing such useful input to our meetings, and the many staff who have attended to present on many interesting subjects. We also extend our thanks to all staff and the whole school community for their continued support through these challenging times.

Finally, I would like to thank all of the parents who participate in the Parent Council, bringing their ideas and opinions to enable us to present a strong parental voice to support our children and the whole school community. On a personal note, I have found it a very rewarding 4 years PC Chair, and am very grateful to you all for giving me that opportunity. I would like to wish the new Chair and committee every success.

Cath Downie, 25th October 2016