

# Minutes for Q & A Meeting with Principal Debbie Armendariz, 9/15/10 6:30 pm

## 1) Karla Zirbes, PTA Pres: Welcome, structure

Goals: better understand the concerns and questions parents have, get answers about those concerns and questions, better understand the principal and her decision making process, inform the move forward as a community

Atkinson parents are very involved as volunteers and have been a part of decision making in the past. It is understood that principals can make decisions unilaterally, but we wanted to have this meeting to answer some questions about changes and decision making processes. There is anger and emotion here today and so I ask for your patience with the format. The title is Q & A; this is not an opportunity for full discussion and brainstorming. But hopefully roots of those feelings will be addressed. There is also potential and joy here for the children and our community and I expect that will also come thru tonight.

## 2) Debbie Armendariz: intro to self, background.

Debbie is the parent of two children attending Atkinson, was a principal in IL for 3 yrs, she received an award for closing the achievement gap in IL, she wanted to move her family to Oregon, she has a background in forestry which she left to do meaningful work with children, she was principal at PPS's Arleta for one year last year.

## 3) FAQ

Karla: The board developed the following questions based on those raised by the language petition, the protesters' letter, questions asked by parents and children. In order to get accurate answers, I reviewed most questions w/Debbie yesterday.

The below questions were asked by Karla Zirbes PTA Pres and answers given by Principal Debbie Armendariz:

School Day questions

Q: You've stated that school starts at 8:35. Other places currently and in the past it's stated that, doors open at 8:35 and the late bell & class starts at 8:45. Could you please clarify when school starts?

A: Doors open and the teachers' classroom responsibilities start at 8:35. Kids need to be in their classroom before final bell at 8:45. If they are not in the room by 8:45, they must go to the office to sign in.

Q: What is Jeannie's current role at the school? Why isn't she at lunch anymore? Why isn't she greeting as kids arrive at school?

A: Principal Debbie has narrowed Jeannie's time to volunteer coordination and helping in classrooms. She is no longer greeting kids and parents in the morning so she can focus on those

duties. Jeannie is no longer on lunch duty. Teachers requested a new lunchtime plan to make the cafeteria more orderly.

Q: Why isn't someone greeting kids & adults at arrival time?

A: Debbie is checking in with each teacher individually during that time and feels that is the best use of her time. She feels your child's teacher should be the one to greet them and you each day.

Q: Why don't we have music in the halls at arrival time?

A: We should. Previously a parent volunteer was doing this. Principal Debbie enjoys the music playing and has tried to reinstate it and will be sorted out whose role that is.

Q: Why are parents K-2 picking up kids outside?

A: To alleviate a fire hazard from overcrowded halls and to conform to teachers only working 7.5 minutes after the bell rings. If a child is not picked up within 7.5 minutes he or she will be taken to the office for supervision.

Q: Will we move K-2 pick-up to the gym when it's raining?

A: Undecided. Principal Debbie is formalizing a new plan for rainy day dismissal of K-2 students which she will communicate thru the FYI.

#### Language, Culture questions

Q: Will Atkinson be changed into an all immersion (charter) school?

A: Absolutely not.

Q: How did you make the decision to cut most of the neighborhood language program?

A: She heard from the community at the end of last year that the neighborhood language program was important to people and that it had shortcomings. She also heard that Music and physical activity were very important, and others had concerns about academic rigor. The language program was not funded properly. It was funded by money meant for ESL programs. The District noticed the funding misallocation last fall. *[Post-meeting clarification from Debbie: The Educational Assistants (EAs) working under this program were working well outside of their job description and union contract.]* Teacher Lilian Sarlos also stated that the program started as a heritage language program and morphed to include all children in the neighborhood classes. If the new Language Committee will look into the Immersion and Neighborhood teachers doing an instruction swap, Debbie would be happy to consider that option.

Q: Why didn't you involve parents in your decision of what to cut?

A: Additional cuts happened over the summer. It is the principal's discretion what is cut or added. Principal Debbie will make decisions as needed and will involve parents if time allows and it is a benefit to her decision making process. Debbie acknowledged the need to communicate decision making with parents thru the FYI.

Q: Who is going to receive Chinese language instruction?

A: Unknown at this time. Debbie has allocated a .6 FTE of the Atkinson budget towards this in

working with the Confucius Grant's Chinese instructor - that position may be part time and there was a hold up with the instructors' visas which has caused a delay.

Q: The PTA now has a new Language Committee. Will you work with them on allocating Chinese language instruction or look at an instruction exchange with Immersion teachers?

A: Yes. Principal Debbie is willing to work with the newly formed language committee on these issues.

#### Recess & lunch questions

Q: Some kids are complaining that they have to rush through lunch. How long do kids have for recess and for lunch?

A: All students have 20 minutes to eat lunch and a minimum 20 minutes recess time immediately following lunch. Debbie's own daughter has complained about not enough recess. Debbie asked neighboring PPS elementary principals about their length of recess - those quoted were each 15 or 20 min. per day *[Post-meeting clarification from Debbie: she talked to almost 10 schools; most were 20 min., one was 15, one was 30.]* She will be reviewing this, especially for K-2.

Q: Are you open to discussing recess before lunch?

A: Yes, especially for K-2 students. *[Post-meeting clarification from Debbie: she will be making this change soon, not for 3-5; they are clearing their trays within the allotted time.]*

Q: Why did you change the number of recesses?

A: To more closely align with recess time taken by other schools in the area, and to provide for needed additional academic time.

*Link to PPS Academic Core Requirements:*

[http://www.atkinsonelementarypta.org/forms\\_docs/academic\\_core\\_req\\_pps.pdf](http://www.atkinsonelementarypta.org/forms_docs/academic_core_req_pps.pdf)

Q: You stated "movement breaks" are taken "as needed". Is each teacher required to take breaks?

A: Not required but encouraged to provide these as needed.

#### Additional questions

Q: Are you concerned about some of the large class sizes?

A: Mostly in the kindergarten classes. [Update: PPS has allocated Atkinson an additional FTE for a new neighborhood K class.]

Q: Can class size change?

A: At the end of September, PPS realigns staffing and we will possibly get additional support for large classes. Update to follow in the FYI.

Q: What is your cookie policy (kids eating sweets packed in lunches from home)?

A: Principal Debbie is pro-cookie. Parents may pack cookies and sweets in their child's lunch as

they wish.

Q: Have you reprimanded kids for being too noisy in the halls?

A: No. She will not reprimand students for being noisy in the halls. Teachers are encouraged to shut their doors if it is too loud. No running in the halls is enforced for safety reasons.

Q: How do you plan to make decisions affecting the school going forward?

A: Some issues will involve input from parents, some including safety and immediate needs will not.

#### **4) Brief time for attendees' Q & A**

Q: Is Atkinson a failing school?

A: No. State requires standardized tests to be given to all students because of the "No Child Left Behind" act. [Atkinson's State report was "satisfactory" and there was one missed Federal target for number of students tested] Principal Debbie expects to pass all requirements next year.

Q: Realistically is there time in the (neighborhood) students' schedule for language?

A: Yes.

Q: Clarify structured wellness breaks.

A: Teachers have the choice and are encouraged to provide movement breaks to their students throughout the day. This time is with own class and is not shared time with other classes [*Post-meeting clarification from Debbie: it could be shared, teachers schedule it on their own.*]. Check with your child's teacher about specifics.

Link to PPS Wellness Policy: [http://www.pps.k12.or.us/files/board/3\\_60\\_062\\_AD.pdf](http://www.pps.k12.or.us/files/board/3_60_062_AD.pdf)

Q: Did Principal Debbie follow PPS rules to get her own two children into the Spanish immersion program?

A: Her son was admitted thru the lottery under a native language slot since Spanish is spoken at home. An adjustment was made increasing the class size to accommodate her daughter under the hardship clause as it would have been a hardship to not have both her kids at the same school. This has also been done in other hardship cases. [*Post-meeting clarification from Debbie: her daughter was transferred under the hardship request because she was attending Beach's immersion program. Both students were admitted while Chris G. was principal.*]

Q: Some students at the school are doing well academically, but are socially challenged. The new lunch and recess policy is hard on some kids socially. Can this issue be addressed?

A: Yes. Principal Debbie has a plan to meet with each teacher and review each of their students to address this and other non-academic issues. Please see or email Debbie directly if you have immediate concerns.

#### **5) Additional comments from Principal Debbie:**

The best way to reach her is via e-mail which she answers within 48 hrs.

A great thing for parents to do is encourage/praise/offer assistance to your child's teacher because what Debbie is asking them to do is hard work.

Principal Debbie's main focus is closing the achievement gap. ELL (English language learner) kids have been ignored for years and now is the time to help these kids. The neighborhood parents/students may need to experience change to something like neighborhood language in order to help ELL kids succeed. Debbie made a plea for parents to join her in helping her close the achievement gap.

Comment from parent Robin Feidelson: This meeting has been good, and good to see another side of the principal, but wishes this had been done earlier. She is still displeased but better understands the principal's decisions and process, and plans to give her a chance.

Comment from teacher Chris Weber: He feels very supported by the principal, appreciates her passion, and would take a pay cut to follow her if needed.

## **6) Next steps, follow up**

Language group will advise Debbie on allocation of Chinese language instruction. If you are interested in being a member of the committee or just receiving updates, please sign up at the Open House/Social PTA table.

Possible achievement gap special committee?

Debbie will respond to your unanswered questions if you will write your name & email at the top of your paper and give them to her.

## **7) Thanks**

Karla: Thanks to Debbie, staff, parents for coming & participating on such short notice. Part of the hope was to give people a forum and preserve the positive excitement of the Open House / Ice Cream Social. We hope that this was helpful. Notes will be posted on PTA bulletin board & web site within a week, hopefully sooner.

### ***\* Post-meeting additional Q & A:***

Q: Will you support cultural events like Lunar New Year? (these are parent / PTA run)

A: Debbie: "I think funding this through parent involvement funds would be appropriate and I would support involving the staff. "