

High School Forum - September 26, 2011

Indian Ridge Middle School, Room 118

SAF/PTA/PTSO Representative Focus Group Meeting Minutes

Attendees (High School/Committee Affiliation): Cheryl DeGol (Coral Glades/PTSO), Denine Fogel (Coral Glades/PTSO), Bill Gallagher (Pompano Beach/SAF), Laurel R. Love (Piper/SAF&PTA), Kim Mathesie (Marjory Stoneman Douglas/SAF&PTA), Nereida Miller (South Plantation/SAF&PTSO), Janine Musumeci (Taravella/Teacher&PTSO), Karen Navarrete (Western/PTA), Melodee Putt (School Outreach Subcommittee), Susan Spicker (Plantation/PTA)

The meeting was called to order at 8:05 p.m. with a welcome from the School Outreach Subcommittee Co-Chair (facilitator), who asked each attendee to introduce themselves and state which school they were representing. Attendees were asked to refrain from using their cell phones during the meeting and to respect the open discussion format and the opinions expressed by the other focus group representatives. Then they were requested to complete the SAF/PTA questionnaire.

During this time, one attendee wanted to know why the “Center” schools for children with special needs are not invited to participate in school-sponsored events like this forum. The focus group facilitator was also asked how the Parent Survey included in their meeting folders (for completion at a later time) would be collected. The facilitator offered to pick them up. One attendee said she was going to copy for others and would drop off when completed.

After completion of the questionnaire, discussion ensued about the various items on the questionnaire.

The majority of attendees had children in high school (8), but one had a child in middle school and one had a child in elementary. One had children in a magnet program; the rest had children in neighborhood public schools.

SAF/PTA/PTSO meeting times varied, but most attendees agreed that evenings worked best for them and for their committee members. Most preferred early evening but a couple of attendees suggested just after the end of a standard workday, when some staff from the schools would still be on site. One holds back-to-back meetings of PTSO/SAF. One representative said her committee meetings are held in the afternoon, right after school dismissal, and she thought that optimum meeting times may vary depending on the geographic location of the school. Her area school has a lot of stay-at-home parents, who are able to attend daytime meetings. The representative with kids in a magnet school said that the magnet parents are much more involved than the parents of other students in the school. One attendee said that her school has a lot of reassignments and that the parents of those students are not actively involved because of the distant location of the school.

When asked what form of communication works best for their individual committees, all agreed that different kinds used in tandem work best. All feel that Robocalls improve meeting

attendance but want the calls to be more timely, stating that they need to be completed at least 48 hours in advance but often happen the day before or even after the event has already taken place. One attendee said Twitter is one of their methods of communication. Another said her group goes to a printer for their announcements and works the carpool lanes for distribution. Morning announcements were also mentioned as a good way to communicate, but one representative said not all the teachers allow broadcast of the morning announcements in their classes, particularly the AP teachers, who feel it disrupts their classes and interferes with their heavy workload. Digital bulletins that run all day long were also mentioned as a good means of communication with the students, but again not all teachers provide access. One representative said their PTSO President sends out e-mails every Sunday providing information not just about PTSO meetings but about registration dates and deadlines that students need to be aware of.

All attendees said they are not consulted about the school budget; they are just informed. Many would like to be consulted about the budget and also mentioned that they would like to have some input on which teachers are retained when layoffs are pending.

Discussion started on how the economy and school budget shortfalls are affecting children's ability to attend school. Comments were made about the increase in children receiving free or reduced lunch and how some kids sell their free lunch for money (leading some schools to require ID at lunchtime) and how some of the increase might not be due just to the economy but may also be related to fraud. Attendees asked if anyone is checking the validity of the free/reduced lunch applications so fraud can be detected. Mention was made that free lunch recipients may also qualify for free SAT/ACT. Comcast low-priced computer/internet service for free lunch students was discussed.

When asked about the role their committees play in the schools, PTA and PTSO representatives said they exist for the good of the school. They bridge the financial gap between what the school and students already have and what they still need. They help promote a positive attitude and boost morale. One group finances a special holiday dessert gathering and employee-of-the-month recognition awards. One of the SAF representatives said that her group works closely with their mayor and city commissioners, who are all actively involved with the schools in their city.

The focus group facilitator mentioned that her neighborhood school sent out an announcement saying that you could join the PTA but didn't have to attend any meetings. All attendees agreed that they would accept dues from parents who wanted to contribute financially but were not willing or able to attend meetings.

One attendee wanted to know:

- How many schools have PTA, PTO, PTSA and PTSO?
- How long have they been in existence?
- How many people attend the meetings?

The question was asked about whether there was a way to do mass e-mailings for the different schools. The various committees have their members' e-mail addresses but do not have a way to reach out via e-mail to the rest of the parents in their schools.

Following are the various programs mentioned when attendees were asked which initiatives their committees had undertaken that proved successful.

- The mayor in one city sits down with each school in his city to find out how things are going. The mayor and commissioners are invited to attend PTSO meetings.
- One SAF group was able to acquire a School Resource Office for each of their schools rather than having to share an SRO, the thought being that children accustomed to working with an SRO from an early age will be more likely to seek them out for help and advice when they are older.
- A PTA group started a mentoring program where their A/P students teach at-risk students, and those at-risk students are not only staying in school but also going on to college.
- A couple of PTSO groups invite guest speakers to their meetings to spark interest and encourage attendance.
- One PTSO group helps fund a closetful of school supplies in their guidance counselor's office so no child can use the excuse that they don't have what they need for their classes.
- One group recognizes students every quarter who have made improvements and wouldn't ordinarily receive recognition (students are nominated by their teachers). The students get their pictures posted in the hallway and receive a gift card to Barnes & Noble. This brings in students and parents who might not normally attend the general meetings. It also serves as a morale/self-esteem booster for the students.
- One PTSO group publicizes their efforts in the community by submitting articles to local publications. They are developing a template to facilitate the article writing for their administration, PTSO and whatever publication shows an interest in doing a feature on their efforts. They hope to receive "brand" recognition through use of their PTSO logo in local articles about their school's achievements. This kind of publicity also attracts business partners, and this PTSO has designed a form for their business partners on ways to get involved, which has been a success. Playing "Devil's Advocate," one attendee asked if this kind of advertising was "crossing the line" and if it was a legal way to spend money. The PTSO has not had to spend any money on the articles because they are community interest stories.
- This same PTSO group keeps a spreadsheet of volunteers and what activities they are willing to participate in, so whenever they sponsor an event, they can just data sort which volunteers have previously indicated their willingness to be involved in a particular activity.
- One attendee said her committee arranged for the principal, BRACE and guidance counselor to speak at their first meeting and had an attendance of 130, a marked increase over the previous year.
- One group sponsors an "Adopt a Teacher" initiative, with a \$15 limit that is used for whatever that teacher needs for the students in their classroom.
- This same group partners with Barnes & Noble to sell their books at a discount in a book store they have set up on site at school.
- Another group reaches out to students to get them more involved through activities like a Dodge Ball game, students vs. faculty. That activity is very popular, and the winners get to wear "Dodge Ball Champ" t-shirts.
- One PTSO copies and sends their membership application home with students their first day of school and attaches an envelope for return of the forms/dues.

- Someone suggested that a strong teacher to advocate for PTSO would be helpful and that an SGA teacher would be a good candidate.

Following are the various programs mentioned when attendees were asked which initiatives their committees had undertaken that had been unsuccessful.

- Don't go up against Glee or the American Idol finale. One person said we live in the real world and need to realize there are other things going on and not to schedule meetings that will compete with other groups.
- Most agreed that there have been breakdowns in communication that caused failures.
- One group sponsored a Walk-A-Thon that did not do as well as it could have in part because many of the 7th period teachers wouldn't allow their students out of class early to participate.
- Don't have parents selling food or other items at school functions. Kids buy from other kids.
- One group tried a "Dancing with the Stars" type of event with teachers as contestants. It failed because a lot of the teachers ended up backing out; they didn't want to make the time commitment.
- Guitar Hero tournament that ended up with only a handful of contestants.

In answer to the question about the representative committee's interaction with other committees, most responded that their answer would differ depending on which organization was being discussed. The majority of attendees felt like they worked well with about half of the other school-based committees but were treated as competitors by the others. There were a couple of notable exceptions, one where the organizations from one school all realize that they are working toward a common goal and another where the football booster club turned over some of their parking dates to other groups when they realized they couldn't completely cover the schedule. All agree that they need to respect the times when other groups are actively fundraising for their particular activities.

When focus group representatives were asked if they felt like the District was supportive of their efforts, the responses were "No" or "Don't Know."

There was some discussion about contacting local businesses for funds or incentives. Since many small businesses are overwhelmed with requests from several school groups in their area, the suggestion was made that large corporations be tapped for donations -- not by the local schools and committees but by the District.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:03 p.m.