



## **PROGRAM SUMMARY**

2015 PA Presidents Forum

Washington Episcopal School

*Wednesday, May 7, 2014*

Parents Council Board Member, Ms. Carin Dessauer, thanked the Washington Episcopal School for hosting the program and introduced the Head of School, Mr. Kirk Duncan. Mr. Duncan extended a warm welcome and highlighted the vital role Parent Association Presidents play within schools. They not only support teachers with professional development opportunities and the technology needed, but they are also an amazing group of parents with a passion and commitment to schools. He spoke of his appreciation for the important work parents within the Parent Association provide and how they remain consistent agents in the midst of change.

Ms. Dessauer introduced Parents Council President, Ms. Joan Levy who welcomed attendees and shared that Susan Cain, author of the book “Quiet,” will be the keynote speaker at the October 7 program in celebration of the Parents Council’s 50th anniversary this year. Ms. Dessauer then briefly introduced the panel of Parent Association Presidents participating in the forum who would be offering wisdom, successes and challenges they experienced this past year on the topic of “If I Knew Then What I Know Now.”

### **Ms. Lee Koles – Norwood School (Kindergarten – 8th grade)**

This is the first year of a two-year term for Ms. Koles as Parent Association President. Previously, she supported the school as a volunteer in her son’s classroom and felt unqualified for the job when approached to serve as President. She established the following five items that she has learned along the way:

- **Build a great team.** The key is to surround yourself with smart, positive people with diverse talents. It's okay not to know everything and ask questions for help.
- **Promote the PA.** Don't assume parents at school know what you do. Some may feel it's an exclusive club and may not understand the events and initiatives that are the PA's responsibilities. Start a PR campaign with a designated communications chair. Posters and pamphlets highlighting a calendar of events or how to get involved at the school are readily visible and available for parents. With the goal for more parents to attend the programs and be what everyone talked about, hot topics, good food, coffee and a slideshow of events with music were planned at meetings and exact timing was followed to be respectful of schedules.
- **Support volunteers.** Take the time to support the school. Let volunteers know that you care by showing up at every event, responding to e-mails promptly, thanking volunteers publicly and often, showing appreciation and supporting room parents behind the scenes. Bounce ideas with administration and development often.
- **Keep Calm and Carry On.** Independent schools involve two emotional stresses: money and our children. Understand that there will always be fires to put out. Logistical issues and passions may not be aligned with priorities. Embrace that you can't please everyone, apologize and take responsibility, keep e-mails professional and engage a VP to help you navigate the waters. Don't vent frustration on paper or text. Don't get involved with gossip and project positivity. Remember the big picture, that you are doing this for the children, and want them to have a good experience.
- **Get ready to roll early.** Meet with committee members over the summer to go over expectations and rules ahead of time.
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**Ms. Margaret Johnson – Maret School (Kindergarten – 12th grade)**

Ms. Johnson shared the following insights:

- You will have time to do it all.
- The most important factor is knowing the PA mission. Refresh by-laws and re-craft the mission if necessary.

- Be explicit about what you want to accomplish whether it's setting goals for fundraising, improving outreach or parent peer group program and share with parent body and Executive Committee.
- Establish a good relationship with the Head of School; a strong collaboration helps produce the best programs. Plan a leadership meeting once a month.
- Speak plainly. Avoid using acronyms and don't assume everyone understands the PA process. There is a fine line to welcome new families and not bore the old ones. Maret created a one-page flyer for events that explained how to get involved.
- Make meetings rich, fresh and fun. Look further and assess what else can be done. In the past, Maret increased attendance by inviting a sports trainer to discuss concussions and hosting a technology/social media meeting.
- Be mindful of your team's time commitment. Be flexible with volunteers and experiment with conference calls or other ways to engage. The eight person Executive Committee took a break from the usual schedule and held a successful brainstorming session about volunteering instead.
- Make sure parents do not perceive the PA as a type of club. Parents want to be invited or welcomed in. Reach out to ask people to do a job. Provide as many points of entry to parents to participate in: small groups for coffee, cocktail party at the home of the Head of School, brown bag lunches, workshops at night or on weekends.
- If you don't know – ask. Find out what parents want to hear by conducting a survey.
- Be visible. Maret provided permanent nametags for the Executive Committee members. This created a strong impact and established a relationship.
- Write personal notes, e-mails or a face-to-face encounter to thank volunteers. Be specific as to what the volunteer did, acknowledge, honor and celebrate.
- Be aspirational. Think about what you can do to enhance the organization's future.

**Ms. Michelle Go – St. Stephen's and St. Agnes School (JK – 12th grade)**

Ms. Go echoed the same ideas presented and agreed that the most important is knowing the PA mission. At her school, three goals are repeated at every PA meeting:

1. Support the Head of School and Division Heads
2. Build and sustain relationships with teachers
3. Raise funds to support mission

The PA President job is complex and challenging. Most truths Ms. Go felt she was told were true while others were not...

**Untruth #1:** If the school offers a personal parking spot, decline it and park like everyone else!

Being PA President is not about popularity, but leadership. If the school shows appreciation, take it!

**Untruth #2:** Being PA President is all about the ideas.

The goal should instead be on bringing ideas to meetings. Realize that other ideas are out there and focus should be on executing other people's ideas. For example, the pamphlet idea was used and included in the school's August mailing. As a result, dues went up 20%.

**Untruth #3:** People read e-mails

Ms. Go was warned people do not read their e-mails, but what she discovered is people like to receive specific information by a method of choice. The more specific the message, the higher read rate. If the message is important, pick up the phone or stop someone in the hall for a one-on-one discussion.

**Untruth #4:** Decisions need to be made by consensus.

Tough decisions need to be made alone. Be sure to speak with and get support from the school liaison. Explain reasons behind decision and maintain confidentiality.

**Untruth #5:** Success is measured by how much money you raise.

Everyone wants to do a good job, but money is not an important measure of success. Attendance at events is more important. Figure out what matters most to you and your team. Ms. Go's school had record attendance this year due to a strategic goal.

**Untruth #6:** Being PA President is a thankless job!

Parents, students and administration are thankful, they just don't tell you every day!

## **Q&A:**

### **Q: How do you gracefully say no or redirect parents who do not support the PA's mission?**

Add more service projects to steer parents who want their causes to be recognized.

Endorse motivation and let the parent know that you will take their interest under advisement. Offer them something to do the following year. Channel the enthusiasm in a different direction.

Redirect and soften response: keep in mind for another year or another position.

PA tries to help find the right fit. Sometimes a person can grow into the position. It may not be right for them now, but it could be in a few years. Don't shut out completely.

### **Q: Can anyone touch upon the nominations process of the Executive Board?**

At SSSA, a nominations committee comes up with a slate. Committee Chairs are appointed by the President. Participation is low for voting at General Membership meeting. The biggest job as the PA President is to figure out who you want for different roles. Tap early to find the person you want. Take a chance and ask around who might be good for the job.

Aidan Montessori revamped its nominations by making it online. The school had experienced a low turnout rate for voting in person and tried an online process instead. An e-mail was sent to weigh in by clicking on a link to nominate people for every role. You could nominate yourself or someone else. The person chosen received a call to make sure they were on board and another e-mail provided the link to approve the slate. Everyone felt they had a say in the process and the turnout was high. They extend two chairs for every event and two PA Presidents: one new and one who has done it before.

At Landon, an Executive Committee of five people is decided on by officers. The rule for a Room Mom role is that once you have filled the position, you cannot do it again for another 5 years with the exception of senior moms-they can be nominated.

### **Q: What do you do if you receive feedback that someone is great and then you find out that they are actually difficult to work with?**

Understand people's personalities to try to make them fit in somewhere.

Figure out where they can shine; understand their strengths.

Make sure people are not tapped out by too many asks and spread thin. You want to find people who are eager, not burned out.

**Q: When did you survey/plan for next year?**

Sent out a Survey Monkey with 5-6 questions at end of the school year. Questions were specific to needs and feedback received was not what the school expected.

A survey was conducted at Back-to-School night. Parents were asked to fill out forms.

**Q: Have any of your schools held parent-peer monitor programs?**

Parent chats are organized by grade. It's an opportunity to chat with the Principal. Most chats are academically focused.

Peer groups have not been very well attended. The school counselor has been asked to be the facilitator next year. Questions posed ahead of time develop relationships with parents.

The Lab School plans division discussions once a month that are very popular with parents. A parent committee works with the counselor to come up with a topic/theme.

The Congressional Schools of Virginia started division coffees. They are an opportunity for parents to discuss topics such as developmental stages, curriculum and ask questions with other parents and administration present.

**Q: What time of day do you hold PA meetings or peer groups? What is most effective?**

- Peer groups twice a year in evenings.
- General meetings mostly in the morning, once in the evening.
- Wednesday mornings or Thursday evenings.
- Peer group meetings after drop-off; the one in the evening is not well attended.
- If faculty is present, meetings are scheduled in the evening. People will make the effort with a great speaker, availability of childcare, providing pizza.
- One brown bag lunch in the fall and one in the spring. Initiative for new parents initially.

**Q: How do you get more grades involved? More Dads? Not the same people?**

- Hold meetings on different campuses if possible at your school. This tends to bring in different people.
- At Landon, Lower School Dads sit next to Upper School Dads in the Father's Club. The group organizes a spaghetti dinner, ski trip and breakfast.

- Stone Ridge offers a Lower School program where room parents need to be a couple. This involves Dads. Father's Club is very successful.
- Concord Hill does not have a PA, but a mom and dad act as room parents. Trips are organized by the Dad, parties by the Mom.

**Q: How many general all-school meetings do you schedule each year?**

- One PA meeting a month
- Five general meetings a year with two speaker events, two workshops and two peer group meetings.
- Four meetings open to all parents and one evening speaker program.

**Q: Examples of speakers? Faculty or outside presenters?**

- College counselor
- Director of Counseling
- Athletic Directors on topic of concussions
- Technology Directors
- Math department and administration to cover academic issues
- Middle School Head spoke on the topic of "Taking the Mystery out of Middle School."
- Social Media speaker
- Service Director
- Speaker series on buzz topics such as "Living in a Digital World."