

**PCW Parent Association Presidents’ Forum**

May 7, 2019

The Primary Day School

The Parents Council of Washington (PCW) Parent Association Presidents’ Forum for incoming and current Parent Association (PA) Presidents was held on May 7, 2019 at The Primary Day School (Primary Day). Thirty-three incoming or current PA Presidents attended.

The event Co-Chair, Mena Burke, introduced Mr. Scott Lawrence, Head of School at Primary Day, who welcomed the attendees. PCW President Susan Newell then provided an overview of PCW’s mission and its 2019-2020 programs, including the addition of a lower school program. She invited the group to attend PCW’s Orientation Program for PCW Representatives and PA Presidents on September 17, 2019 at Holton-Arms School. The featured speaker at Orientation will be Phyllis Fagell, who is a counselor at Sheridan School, a therapist in private practice and a columnist on parenting for *The Washington Post*.

PCW board member Katherine Corsico mentioned that PCW’s 2019 Best Practices e-binder, on the topic “Promoting Student Well-Being,” is available and can be found on the PCW website [here](https://www.parentscouncil.org/programs-events/best-practices-forum/).

Ms. Burke next explained the format for the program. She noted that the agenda contained suggested topics for discussion, but encouraged the participants to discuss what was of interest to them. The attendees were divided into four small groups based on the size of their school, and were asked to report out 3-5 ideas or concerns to share with the entire group. Time was then set aside for attendees to ask questions of the full group.

**Small Group Discussions:** The four small group discussions were lively, and resulted in the following key takeaways/suggestions for PA Presidents:

* **Cultivating, Caring for and Nurturing Volunteers**
	+ Motivating and retaining volunteers is key to the mission of all PAs. Volunteer recognition shows the appreciation schools have for their volunteers and highlights their importance. Schools can thank volunteers in many ways. One suggestion was to shine a spotlight on a different volunteer/volunteer committee once a month or every few weeks via the school newsletter or in a central, physical location where other parents will see it. A brief bio and photo of the parent volunteers, along with a description of their volunteer roles is a nice acknowledgement of their time and commitment to the school. Other ways to show appreciation for volunteers included receptions, thank you notes and awards.
	+ Many schools continue to address volunteer and fundraising fatigue. One way is to separate those two roles. Expanding the volunteer pool through outreach also helps spread the work. Make sure that the events that the PA holds are ones that are true to its mission and role.
	+ Some participants also suggested that the PAs of PCW member schools connect with similar schools, so they can continue to share information and resources. This forum is one way to do that. Another is to have inter-school community events. For example, two of the area high schools co-host an annual trivia night for their parents.
* **Board/Officer Structure and Role of the PA**
	+ At-large board members/officers of a PA provide flexibility and volunteers where needed. They may also offer a way for more working parents to contribute, as the time commitment may be more limited.
	+ The board members/officers of the PA should be diverse, and the PA should be inclusive. Outreach to all parents is key to building the school’s community, including across all school divisions.
	+ Make sure that you know what the role of the PA is in your school. Start by determining if your PA has bylaws or other similar operational documents. Understand what events your PA is responsible for running.
* **Communications**
	+ The attendees agreed that there is a very delicate balance between too much and too little information. PAs cannot “spoon-feed” information to parents. The key is ensuring that parents have access to sufficient information in order to participate fully in the life of the school.
	+ A mix of centralized communication for certain things and through grade or class level representatives for other information may be the most effective.
	+ Some schools distribute a regular PA newsletter (in at least one case, quarterly), in addition to school-wide newsletters. The PA newsletters highlight volunteers, volunteer opportunities and PA specific events.
	+ One PA president mentioned they host quarterly parent coffee conversations to provide a less formal way to meet with broader groups of parents and communicate events and information.
* **Budgets**
	+ The budget for PA dues and staff gifts was discussed.
	+ Some schools include PA dues in the school’s tuition, while others choose to collect the annual dues separately at the beginning of the school year. Whether the fee is per student or per family also varied.
	+ Some PAs have fundraising components for the PA. Others have fundraising events that are used to cover PA costs, with additional amounts given to the school for dedicated purposes.
* **Time Commitment**
	+ Another key part of a successful PA is ensuring that all volunteers understand the time commitments involved in each role. Transparency as to the actual time involved and efforts to use that time more efficiently help attract and keep parent volunteers.
	+ To the extent possible, meetings should be streamlined. One school noted that it had reduced the number of PA meetings by 2 per year.
	+ Once you know the approximate amount of time needed for events and roles, make sure that it is included in any job descriptions for volunteers. This type of institutional knowledge will help the PA be sustaining.

**Large Group Discussion:** The large group discussion centered on questions raised by the attendees.

* **Interaction Between the PA President and Head of School/Administration.** How does/should the PA President interact with the Head of School? Do you have regular meetings? Is the Head of School included in PA Meetings?
* The number of PA meetings with the Head of School is school specific.
* Most of the attendees agreed that in-person meetings are the most effective, and should happen several times throughout the school year, if not monthly. The Head of School may attend some meetings but other members of the school administration may be more appropriate at others.
* Whether the Head of School attends meetings with the PA President, PA Officers and/or the PA meetings with parents, an agenda should be prepared and available in advance of the meeting.
* Including the Head of School in PA meetings is a way to keep them more engaged with the parent community and to encourage attendance at those meetings.
* Regular meetings also help to validate the PA’s role and earn the respect of the Head of School.
* A Head of School or Principal is able to give the PA the “30,000-foot level view” of the school.
* Grade-level meetings or division meetings may be had with division heads or other members of the school administration.
* Attendee responses varied, but the general consensus was that regular, standing meetings with members of the school administration are more beneficial than ad hoc meetings. The latter can be more problematic, because it does not give the PA enough time to cover all of the issues. Regularly scheduled meetings also help set the tone for the school, and create an open forum for the PA members or officers to address any outstanding issues or concerns.
* **Board Membership**. The attendees were asked by a show of hands which PA Presidents were members of their school’s Board of Trustees. About half of the attendees indicated that they have a role as PA President on their Board of Trustees.
* **PA Meetings.** How many Parent Association meetings do you have throughout the school year? Responses to this question varied.

* Schools ranged from quarterly to monthly PA meetings.
* The time of the meetings varied as well, with some holding morning meetings, some holding evening meetings and some schools alternating morning and evening meetings.
* Generally, the executive board or officers of the PA meet before the general PA meeting. There may also be preliminary meetings with the Head of School or other members of the school administration to preview the agenda for those general PA meetings.
* **Parent Surveys.** Can you share your experience of having a Parent Survey?

Most PAs agreed that an anonymous exit survey for graduating students and their parents is an excellent idea, so they can continue to improve their school community. The purpose of the survey would be to find out what they loved the most about their school, and what they would like to see improved.

* **Recruitment/Selection of Volunteers.** How does your school handle the recruitment of school volunteers?

The attendees discussed different recruitment models, but some of the highlights were:

* Some schools send a school-wide email soliciting volunteers via an interest form, or have nomination committees solicit nominees from different parts of the school community. At other times, people may be asked directly to volunteer.
* A few schools start the recruitment process before spring break via communications to all school divisions. In their communications, they include descriptions of the volunteer roles available and the time required.
* Other schools begin recruiting at back-to-school night and in their weekly or monthly newsletters, as well as at social events throughout the school year (e.g., ice cream socials).
* The recruitment process is not always a perfect or fair process, but should be as inclusive and diverse as possible and broad in scope.
* More often than not, the selection process is based on the volunteer’s experience and interest level.
* In many schools, a person must have some prior experience volunteering on a particular committee or event before they are even considered for nomination to chair that committee or event.
* Some schools have term limits (e.g., a two-year term) for specific positions/ committees. That allows more popular positions to be filled by a broader number of people. Succession planning is key. Officers or Executive Committee members should have experience with the PA in other volunteer capacities.
* In some cases, the parent volunteer serves as the Vice-Chair for a committee in their first year and Chair in their second.
* Try to get the word out to new families on volunteer opportunities early. Back-to-school night, new family orientations, etc. are good places to highlight volunteer opportunities.
* Some schools use a Google form for parents to self-nominate or to list their 5 top choices for volunteer roles. The final decisions are based on years of participation and experience.
* At the end of a volunteer’s term, some PA Presidents request that the volunteer update the description of their role, the time commitment for that role and what they have done, since every volunteer brings a different personality and style to the role. This way the level of time commitment is fully transparent.

**Closing Remarks**

The Forum ended with PCW board member Frazier Schulman describing the PCW membership renewal procedure and the fee structure for PCW membership. Ms. Newell discussed the 2019-2020 PCW schedule. PCW board member Malvika Paddock discussed the information and networking coffees PCW started in 2018-2019 for member school PCW Representatives and PA Presidents, and noted that, while the dates have not yet been set, coffees will be held in Washington, DC and Northern Virginia during the 2019-2020 school year. She also stressed the importance of attending the September Orientation. Ms. Burke ended the program by thanking the attendees and calling their attention to the PCW program archives for additional information on prior PCW events. This information can be found on the PCW website [here](http://www.parentscouncil.org/programs-events/).