

University of Chicago Laboratory Schools

Parents' Association

March 14, 2011 Meeting

President Peri Altan called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

Ms. Altan reminded the assembled group to read e-news and encouraged interested parents to run for an office on the Parents' Association Board. She then called upon the director and principals to give their updates.

David Magill announced that union negotiations are proceeding. There have been five sessions so far. The main issue in the negotiations has been teacher quality. Mr. Magill also noted that there will be a parent survey right after spring break for parents of children in kindergarten, 4th grade, 8th grade or 12th grade. He mentioned that Connections this year was a particularly fun event and raised \$450,000-\$500,000, one quarter of which will be allocated to financial aid, and the remainder of which will be allocated to teacher training.

Carla Young thanked the Connections volunteers, especially Tracy Coe, and all parents who attended Connections. The funding for teacher training is a very important resource.

Sylvie Anglin seconded Carla's heartfelt thanks to those involved with Connections. She noted that almost all Lower School students participated through the display of their work at the event. Progress reports were online only for the first time this year. Ms. Anglin noted the third grade biography displays, which were presented in the room where the meeting was being held. She also mentioned the gym show, which had taken place earlier that evening, and sent her "huge thanks" to the gym teachers for their efforts in putting it on.

Amani Reed also expressed gratitude for the funding to support teachers. He mentioned that a geology teacher was at the U.S. Geological Survey on the preceding Friday, shortly after the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, as part of a continuing education program. He noted that Middle School trips are coming up and encouraged parents to follow e-news and the website. Transition meetings are also coming up.

A parent asked how teacher training opportunities are selected. Jason Lopez responded that there is a pending request for proposal, which divides opportunities between conferences and seminars, on the one hand, and developing curriculum within the school, on the other hand. Some opportunities take place over the school year, while others take place over the summer. High School teachers are particularly interested in training so that they can make the most of the longer class length that will accompany the changing High School schedule. Other teachers are interested in learning opportunities relating to the planned changes in the divisions of the school over the next four years.

Ms. Altan then introduced a panel on different styles of learning and learning differences. She acknowledged Paula Worthington, a parent who contributed to the formation of the committee on learning differences. Panelists included Pamela Adelman, who has been working

with issues of learning differences since the 1970s and is the outgoing director of the Hyde Park Day School, and Ken James, Lab's Director of Student Services.

Ms. Adelman noted that Hyde Park Day School opened 11 years ago and that Lab sends the largest number of students there. Hyde Park Day School is for students with average to above-average ability and learning disabilities. She discussed the differences between learning disabilities, learning differences and learning styles. Learning disabilities can deal with how one processes information or specific subject areas. One may have a learning disability if there is a significant discrepancy between ability and functioning. Learning disabilities are covered as a disability under federal law, entitling public school students with learning disabilities to certain accommodations, such as extra time to complete assignments. She noted that there have been abuses in the past, as some of the accommodations afforded to children with learning disabilities could also help children who do not have a learning disability but might be stronger in a given area. In order to curb abuse, sometimes the child must demonstrate a history of learning disability in order to be eligible for accommodations. Some teachers choose a multisensory approach, which may help many children.

Ms. Adelman discussed the diagnosis of learning disabilities. A learning disability is a significant discrepancy between achievement and ability. The Wexler IQ test is often used to measure ability, though all IQ tests really measure academic aptitude rather than true intelligence. An achievement test is also administered. Mental processing may also be tested. It is then determined whether a person has a learning disability and, if so, what type and the degree of severity. The amount of disparity between achievement and ability will dictate the intervention. It is also appropriate to account for personal strengths and weaknesses.

Ms. Adelman noted that she has been asked why a learning disability may not have been evident prior to admission. Some children may do fine verbally, so their disability may not become evident until first or second grade, when reading becomes more of a focus. The more severe the disability, the earlier it is likely to be evident. A very bright child may compensate very well for a disability, and, for that reason, the disability may not be discovered until later. Having sufficient time to complete assignments may also allow a child to compensate. Environment affects learning disabilities. Students may find that as reading load and homework increase, the disability may become more apparent.

Ms. Adelman discussed options for intervention, including reading specialists and outside tutoring. About one third of the students who leave Lab to attend Hyde Park Day School go back to Lab after a period of time. Others go to different schools.

A parent asked about distinguishing social or motivational issues from learning disabilities. Ms. Adelman explained that it is a process of elimination. There are likely to be social and emotional issues as a result of a learning disability. One has to find out what is primary and what is secondary.

Ms. Adelman then shared some concluding thoughts from her 40-year career working with learning disability issues:

- Err on the side of early intervention.

- Develop self-understanding and self-acceptance. Most successful people with learning disabilities don't let it define them.
- Counseling is extremely important to help dissipate shame associated with a learning disability.

Mr. James then outlined his background as a mathematician and a math teacher. He explained that understanding learning disabilities allows one to open his or her mind to the way people learn.

He explained that learning styles refers to a processing profile. Teachers could think of their children's minds as instruments and ask what instruments the children are bringing to class and how to best "play" these instruments. Teachers must, however, be faithful to the curriculum and the body of knowledge.

Mr. James addressed how Lab accommodates learning disabilities. We must determine each child's strengths and weaknesses but don't just modify the curriculum to play to the strengths. Students must learn strategies to compensate for their weaknesses. Children with learning disabilities will be frustrated and confused, just as all students will be frustrated and confused. He referred to this as "loving confusion". Students will be—and need to be—challenged.

A parent asked about the relationship between ADHD and learning disabilities. He explained that ADHD used to be considered a learning disability, but now it's considered a disorder in and of itself. Learning disabilities do not have pharmacological interventions. He also noted that 60% of students with learning disabilities have ADD or ADHD.

Another parent asked about the incidence of learning disabilities in boys versus girls. Mr. James explained that there can be a bias of ascertainment. Boys are more frequently referred because they are more likely to act out as a response to a learning disability, while girls are more likely to withdraw and, when referred, tend to be more severe in their disability. It can be helpful to give boys more opportunity to move.

In response to a question from a parent regarding changes to the curriculum to accommodate a person with a learning disability, Mr. James noted that it may be possible to waive a foreign language requirement or to take lower-level math.

A parent asked whether teachers' learning how to deal with learning disabilities can help teachers teach all students better. Mr. James agreed with this statement. He also noted that it is important to diagnose learning disabilities early because there is more flexibility in the curriculum until fifth grade. Mr. James's staff is trying to increase its mentorship of classroom teachers.

Another parent asked whether staff would be added at a younger level in order to facilitate early intervention. Mr. James answered that over the next eight years, his staff will increase from 20 to 30. However, there will be no speech or occupational therapists added to the staff because children needing those services are a small subset of those needing help with learning disabilities.

Mr. James noted that Lab is not a therapeutic school. Approximately 15-17% of Lab's students have some form of learning difference, including learning disabilities and emotional issues, with a range of severity. He noted that Lab is not for everyone, and it may be necessary in some cases to find an alternate placement for a student.

Mr. James then discussed the roles of learning coordinators, who look at the entire school, determine who needs help, perform triage to determine the appropriate resource for the students, monitor issues relating to learning differences and provide direct services to students.

The panel's presentation concluded at 8:25 p.m., at which time the meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Nancy Laethem Stern
Secretary