

Personal Comments on West Hillsborough Elementary School School Site Council 2012-2013

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Hello! I've chosen to write these notes in the first person because (a) these things tend to be so bland and bureaucratic that no one bothers to read them, even if they contain useful and/or important information, (b) some of the issues and topics covered are and were contentious, and I want to capture the contending positions to the best of my ability, rather than wordsmith them into a false sense of agreement, accomplishment or defending the status quo, and (c) I want to make it clear that this is solely my interpretation of the events of the year's meetings and not a consensus report by the council membership. My purpose in creating these notes is to highlight aspects of the year that I think will be of possible interest or concern to anyone that is involved in the educational environment at West in general and the work of the Site Council in specific.

At our first meeting of the year, I introduced the council membership to two goals I hoped to achieve for the year:

1. that everyone felt comfortable asking hard questions and discussing potentially uncomfortable topics in an open and constructive manner, and
2. that the council continue the recent trend of becoming more results-oriented rather than a largely passive opportunity to share anecdotes between parents and staff.

From there, we began a review and discussion of the preceding year's Single Plan for Student Achievement in order to approve a new version. This activity consumed the council's time through the December meeting.

I would like to highlight two issues around the Single Plan that were discussed at some length.

I was aware from previous years that there appeared to be considerable ambiguity about the council's control of its own budget with respect to the Single Plan. According to the statute, the council had a budget to allocate, but in practice, this was never part of the Single Plan review. In order to be able to explain the real situation to the council, I met with Anthony Ranii, HCS D Superintendent, and asked him to explain it to me.

Superintendent Ranii explained that in the past, when there was considerably more money flowing through the four school councils, the councils would often make capital equipment purchases, such as computer printers, that would then encumber the district with ongoing financial commitments—what Superintendent Ranii called “things that eat”. In order to mitigate

against some of this behavior, some of the council budget was slowly redirected toward ongoing administrative priorities. Then, as finances dried up under increasingly tight economic times only the administrative priorities remained, and that has continued into the present day. At West the entirety of the council budget contributes to the pay package for the one remaining teacher's aid, Betsy Miller, who, somewhat ironically, was serving on the council this year.

Superintendent Ranii further stated that the council was in theory free to allocate its budget anyway it chose, but shifting money away from its historical use, the teacher's aid, would only result in the district having to re-allocate money from other uses to replace the lost source, at significant effort. That being said, my having raised the issue was an opportunity for Superintendent Ranii to bring it to the Board of Trustees' attention, so they could begin to think about moving back toward the intent of the statute, where the council is in practise allocating the budget based upon its own goals.

With this introduction to the issue, the council voted to continue using the budget for its historical purpose.

Next, during the council's review of the previous Single Plan, some questions arose quite organically around the purpose of the Plan, given that the goals seemed to either be readily achieved each and every year or seemed to be largely reliant on anecdotal information and hence difficult to evaluate progress at all. In other words, there seemed to be three possible purposes for any given goal:

1. *As a kind of mission statement that articulated a shared value of the school community without any particular mechanism for evaluating progress.* Here the example would be Goal 3 from the previous year, which concerned the concept of "differentiation", and where the associated data comprised anecdotal reporting by the staff as to how that differentiation was occurring. Regardless of how one might feel about differentiation or its implementation at West, it was quite clear that the council was all but incapable of evaluating progress toward that goal, except insofar as the anecdotes provided by the staff representatives on the council were deemed compelling.
2. *As a precautionary mechanism to ensure that the school maintained some existing level of performance or achievement in an area of concern.* The example here was the previous academic goal, based upon STAR scores, which the school had easily met and was expected to meet again without any change or intervention. In this particular case, the goal was considered to be important by an overwhelming majority of the council, but the question was whether it was appropriate to use the Single Plan as a mechanism to safeguard against the possibility of backsliding. The council also discussed incrementally increasing the target of such a goal (e.g., 90% of students should achieve... vs. 80% of students should achieve).
3. *As a mechanism to evaluate progress toward a new area of concern.*

Based upon discussion, the council appeared to agree at the time that the Site Plan goals should at least move in the direction of the third purpose, above. To that end, we agreed to set aside the last meeting of the year to review data to be gathered during the year in order to evaluate which data *could* be acquired and how useful they would be in evaluating progress toward the goals. Jumping ahead in my narrative, it became clear at the final May meeting of the year that there really was no consensus about which of the preceding purposes the Site Plan goals should serve, and I fully expect the council to revisit that discussion at the start of the next year.

Over the course of the next three meetings, through the December meeting, the council reviewed the content and wording of the goals before arriving and voting in approval of the final language.

One other interesting outcome of the Site Plan work was an explicit decision to use the phrase “high achievers” in place of the term “gifted” in the differentiation goal, because it, at the time, was considered a broader and more inclusive term for what was generally agreed to be an underserved group of students at West. In hindsight, this was quite a bit of foreshadowing for the surprising (at least to me) discussion of gifted education later in the year.

The January meeting concerned lunch, diet and nutrition. There was considerable discussion around the school’s “Quiet Dining” policy, which is intended to facilitate the children’s eating rather than chatting in the lunchroom. There was a distinct lack of consensus as to whether this was a good policy or not, with some parents expressing concern that it was hard on some children, particularly the enforcement of the policy which, we were told anecdotally, used to involve relocating violators to a conspicuous location on the MPR stage (and which we were told is no longer done) versus some parents conceding and some staff contending that many children literally would not eat if given the freedom to spend lunch chatting. Some alternatives used elsewhere were raised; for example, having a recess period first followed by lunch thereafter since many children are eager to get outside. No consensus was reached.

The February meeting concerned technology and the future of education. We were joined by Margi Power, Clerk of HCSD Board of Trustees. The content of the conversation is well captured by the minutes.

The March meeting concerned safety and security. One idea that came up that is of special importance and should be communicated widely is the recognition that many families don’t associate the emergency contact they provide at the beginning of the school year with earthquake safety, and often given a geographically distant relative. In the event of an earthquake or similar disaster, where both parents may be physically prevented from returning to the school in order to retrieve their children, it would be very valuable to identify a local contact, ideally a trusted family also at West, where one or both of those parents would be authorized to take children from the school.

Which brings me to gifted education. I knew coming into the April meeting that this is a very sensitive topic at West. I did not realize how confounded that sensitivity is by multiple overlapping issues. West is an extremely competitive environment. Just by way of example, many if not most West children come to associate mathematical ability with relative performance in Speedy Math—timed arithmetic computation drills—in first grade. Children who are proficient at timed math drills are perceived to be “good at math” by their peers and children who struggle are perceived to be “bad at math”, often suffering anxiety about math and general loss of self-esteem as a result. In my role as chair I have had numerous conversations with parents in which I neutrally ask about a child’s experience with Speedy Math and receive a flood of anguish and anxiety in response. And yet there is a substantial fraction of the parent community that adores Speed Math and is utterly resistant to any attempt to modify it. Academic performance, particularly some notion of a child’s relative ranking in their class, even in first grade, is of significant importance to many in the West community, so it’s not all surprising that even the term *gifted* is very loaded at West.

One of the first sensitivities we identified during the council discussion was the distinction between *gifted* and *high achievers*: those students who excel academically to such a degree that they are often not sufficiently challenged at West to remain interested, or, there is a parental sense of lost opportunity in that such children could be learning more in the time they spend at school. It was pretty clear that this distinction is difficult for both parents and staff, particularly the notion that a child could be gifted but perform poorly academically. I think there was broad consensus that there is a large group of academic high achievers at West, and that more should and could be done to better address their educational needs. This was foreshadowed in the Site Plan discussion about differentiation, and the decision to change the wording to “High Achievers”. I intend to revisit this explicitly next year, calling out the distinction.

The staff are understandably careful in their statements about giftedness given the community they interact with. In addition, it is a well known challenge in the public school system, and particularly in affluent, socially liberal areas,¹ to discuss how the relative intelligence of children affects their educational needs and experience, the every-child-is-gifted-in-their-own-way fallacy. And the West staff have a quite understandable esprit de corps and strong work ethic that makes public recognition of an under-served subpopulation at the school uncomfortable. To her credit, Dr. Adams has said publicly and on more than one occasion that there are gifted children at West who probably are not well-served, and that they are probably not the high achievers who are officially recognized by the district as GATE by their top 2% performance over multiple years on the state-mandated STAR tests.

It was also interesting to discuss the council’s perception of how many gifted children we have at West versus what the demographics of Hillsborough suggest. According to the US averages for IQ for a school of roughly West’s size, we would expect one or two gifted children, ten above

¹ Hillsborough is of course one of the most politically Republican cities in the Bay Area, but the general social sentiment is pretty overwhelmingly liberal in outlook.

average “high achievers”, ten or so below average children per grade and the rest of average intelligence. As a thought experiment, I introduced a model for West where the average West student was as bright as an “above average” student nationally, not a completely unreasonable possibility given the correlation between income, education and intelligence and Hillsborough’s socio-demographics. We would then expect one or two highly or profoundly gifted children, ten gifted children, ten average children and one or two below average children per grade, and the rest above average. Interestingly enough, I think the bottom half of the scale met with most of the council’s sense of the school, i.e., the majority of West students are of above average intelligence, there are fewer average children per class and one or two per grade that are below average; but no one thought that there were three or four gifted children in each and every class. This raises the obvious question: Where are the missing gifted children and why are they not at West? One obvious possibility is that many attend other schools, perhaps Nueva, which is right nearby.

My conclusion, unfortunately, is that there simply isn’t enough of a constituency to address the challenges faced by gifted students at West. There are fewer such families than one might expect, on the order of a couple per grade. In contrast, there are many high achievers at West, the school is pitched high to begin with, there is pressure from that subpopulation to push even more, and the staff are using to dealing with such students, all of which creates the sense that the school can and does provide academic challenge and educational opportunity for the top end of the intelligence distribution.

We were joined at the April meeting by Mary Ellen Benninger, Member of the HCSD Board of Trustees.

At the final meeting of the year, we reviewed what data we could toward evaluating the Single Plan goals. There appeared to be a consensus that the academic and essential outcome goals, where there is some quantitative data, could be evaluated, whereas the social-emotional and differentiation goals, where there is as yet no identified data beyond anecdotes and personal perceptions, were very difficult if not impossible to evaluate. For the more quantitative goals, we discussed the idea of looking at historical data as well, with an eye toward evaluating the progress of each cohort as it moves through West. Lastly, as I mentioned in the review of the Single Plan work at the beginning of the year, there was no consensus on the purpose of the goals, something that I’m sure will be revisited at the start of next year.

Again I wish to emphasize that this review reflects only my personal opinions about the council’s discussions and their relationship to West across the year, and not a consensus view of the 2012-2013 School Site Council.

Much thanks to everyone who served on the council, attended the meetings on their own initiative, or accepted an invitation to participate.

