

Shepherd Elementary PTO 2018–2019

- Membership meeting for Wednesday, October 17, 2018

Attendees

- Liz Bradley (President)
- Allison Berg (2nd Vice President)
- Andrea Smith (Treasurer)
- Karen Sloan (Corresponding Secretary)
- Theo Francis (Recording Secretary)
- Jade Brawley (SES Principal)

Guests

- Shanita Burney, DCPS Chief of the Office of Family and Public Engagement
- Deitra Bryant-Mallory, DCPS Senior Deputy Chief, Student Supports
- Angela Chapman, DCPS Interim Chief of Elementary Schools
- Shayne Wells, DCPS Press Secretary
- Maggie White, DCPS Deputy Chief for Inner Core, including music;
- Raquel Ortiz, DCPS Community Action Team member
- Robert White, D.C. Councilman
- Stacey Lincoln, ANC Commissioner

Meeting

The meeting was called to order at 6:43 PM

Ms. Bradley expressed the community's sadness and shock at the events leading to music teacher Raul Gonzalez's arrest by Montgomery County police. She said the entire meeting would be devoted to discussing the District and the school's response to the event.

Principal Brawley thanked attendees for coming and expressed empathy with those in attendance, noting that school staff felt the same range of emotions that parents and others have. She stressed the school and the district's effort to put students' needs, safety and wellbeing first, and the importance of the conversation this evening.

Principal Brawley said she and District officials were prohibited by law from discussing any personnel-related details, and acknowledged that this isn't what parents wanted to hear.

She said that on Wednesday, Oct. 10, DCPS notified her that a member of the staff was being investigated, in connection to an alleged event that happened in Montgomery County. The staff member was placed on leave that same day. Principal Brawley also sent out a communication to the Shepherd community that day, and provided more information when it

became available, the previous day.

Principal Brawley said some students had questions about the news reports, and that school staff sought to keep students focused on schoolwork. For those students for whom the new reports were front-of-mind, members of the District mental-health team, and the school's social worker, were available. In those cases, the school followed up with parents, explaining that the student had questions and had been given a chance to talk with social workers.

Principal Brawley stressed that parents are partners with school staff in these matters.

Ms. Bryant-Mallory expressed confidence that the school community would rally around Shepherd's students and staff, and called the turnout heartwarming. She acknowledged that a key question in such circumstances is what could have been done differently.

Ms. Bryant-Mallory said students, too, have questions, and are trying to understand how somebody that they cared a lot about could have done something like what has been described in the news. She asked parents to be alert for changes in sleep patterns and mood, whether reflecting sadness, anger or other emotions, and asked that parents contact school officials if they notice behavior uncharacteristic of their children.

She also acknowledged that the events are likely to be hard on staff, and asked that everyone in the school community be patient with one another during this process. She asked staff to take advantage of resources available to them through the district's staff assistance program.

She said the district has provided grief and trauma interventions at the school, including from the school's social worker, a school psychiatrist and other social workers on site for at least several days. She said the district is committed to bringing necessary additional resources and that treatment would be evidence-based, demonstrated to be effective for kids who have experienced trauma. She said the district would have additional staff at the school and would remain in touch with school leadership in case there are other ways the district can support the school.

Principal Brawley noted that the students had displayed their resilience less than a year earlier after the untimely death of a teacher, and that the school staff had risen to the occasion. She expressed confidence that staff would do the same again.

Dr. Chapman said the district would remain supportive throughout the school year. She noted that Caroline Albert-Garvey, the instructional superintendent for Shepherd, had been at the school that morning to meet with faculty and families. She introduced other District officials present, including Press Secretary Shayne Wells; Maggie White, deputy chief for inner core, including music; and Raquel Ortiz, a member of the district's community action team, who would moderate the Q&A.

Ms. Ortiz invited questions from attendees. One parent said her children, in fourth and fifth grade, were discussing what other students were talking about, and criticized the media's description of events as unhelpful. She asked what resources were available to parents to discuss the allegations, coverage, etc.

Ms. Bryant-Mallory recommended more careful monitoring of children's television, Internet and social media use, and said the school would send home a toolkit for parents who believe their children are ready to discuss the events, to help guide conversations. The toolkit would include material from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network. She also noted that district and school staff would be available to discuss the information with parents who plan to have a conversation with their child on the subject.

Ms. Ortiz noted that the school psychologists and social workers would be available to help parents have age-appropriate conversations with their children.

A parent of a fourth grader said that, while he understood the district faces restrictions on what it can say, the phrasing of the messages to parents left some concerned that something had happened to one or more students. He asked the district to find a way to share more information without violating any laws, so that parents could prepare their kids. He stressed that children seeing his

Ms. Smith noted that the initial communication from the school was vague, but the details in news coverage were disturbing. She asked what steps the school and district were taking to ensure that no students or staff had been harmed.

Principal Brawley said she shared all the information available to her on Oct. 10. She added that the school has no reason to believe that anything inappropriate was happening with Mr. Gonzalez at the school during her tenure as principal; there has been no allegation from any student, staff or anyone else.

We have not had any incid any report any reas to bel that anything inapprop was happening with Mr. G here at school

An attendee asked whether an investigation is ongoing to ensure this is the case.

Principal Brawley said Montgomery County is leading the criminal investigation, and that the District didn't have a reason to carry out an investigation based on current information.

Ms. Burney said the District isn't at liberty to share any information about any investigation that might be ongoing involving Mr. Gonzalez. She stressed that students' interest and safety are at the top of the District's priority list, but that she can't share some information by law. She saif the District can't comment on the Montgomery County investigation or any investigations within DCPS.

An attendee asked how background checks are generally handled.

Ms. Ortiz said the District does FBI background checks on employees, at hiring and every three years, both for school and central office staff, but that there may also be additional components to background checks. There have been circumstances in which a teacher was offered a position conditional on a background check, but the offer was rescinded as a result of that check. She said she didn't believe there was any indication of problems in Mr. Gonzalez's prior checks.

An attendee said Principal Brawley's indication that there was no investigation conflicted with Ms. Burey's statement that the District couldn't comment.

Principal Brawley said there hasn't been any allegation that would warrant an investigation; and that if there had been, she couldn't provide details.

An attendee asked for advice on speaking to children, given that younger kids overhear comments from older ones. She asked how long the trauma team will stay, given that kids might talk more freely with professionals than with parents.

Ms. Ortiz said the District would provide materials with advice on speaking with children.

Principal Brawley noted that the school has a full-time social worker, Ms. Brown, and a half-time psychologist, plus support from the central office as long as necessary.

Ms. Bryant-Mallory said the current resources included the school mental-health team, plus assistance from central office and from other schools. She said the staff had developed a script for fifth-grade classrooms so that teachers and others would address questions with similar language, so students from different classes aren't receiving different information. Officials would consider whether to take a similar approach with other grades.

An attendee said she was asked by her second-grader what happened to Mr. Gonzalez, and recommended the school address the question with all students, given that younger children overhear older ones and overhear adults talking.

Ms. Bryant-Mallory said interventions are available for younger students, and that staff will be paying attention for signs of change or distress. She said adapting the script for the youngest students might be difficult. Ms. Ortiz said officials would consider adapting the strategy somewhat.

An attendee said she hadn't received the school communication the prior week. Principal Brawley said the parent should be on the list now, and parents not receiving school communications should let her know.

An attendee asked what it means for a teacher to be on leave, and what's being done to support staff.

Dr. Chapman said the instructional superintendent will tell central office what support the school needs. She said the mental-health team will remain on site as long as Principal Brawley says it's necessary.

Mr. Burney noted that she understands that there's information she can't share that she as a parent would want to know. She said that, without discussing the specific situation, in the past when a staff member has been placed on administrative leave for serious incidents, they have not returned to work.

An attendee asked if the District is actively soliciting information from parents and others in case someone observed inappropriate behavior in the past, especially given that Mr. Gonzalez has taught private lessons in students' homes.

Dr. Chapman said parents or others can contact the DCPS CARE Team with any information about inappropriate behavior affecting any student or adult. She noted that all District employees are mandatory reporters and must report anything they learn about through interactions with students and others; but she also encouraged any parent or community member to contact the district in as with any concerns.

In response to a question, Principal Brawley said there were no plans for a school-wide assembly. Given that teachers have the best relationship with students, they are in the best position to answer questions as appropriate.

Ms. Bryant-Mallory said teachers typically use morning meeting times as a way to have conversations about school topics. School and District officials will ask teachers to get feedback on implementation.

An attendee asked questions from students would be addressed, given how much Mr. Gonzalez was liked.

Ms. Bryant-Mallory said the script was primarily designed for older students, but based on feedback from the meeting, officials would take a closer look at how to handle questions from younger students. One option for parents would be to explain in simple terms that Mr. Gonzalez isn't at the school, and monitor responses; sometimes younger children will simply accept the change and move on.

An attendee said she was concerned about the script, and that teachers might not be prepared to follow the script.

Dr. Chapman said teachers could engage mental-health professionals if they are uncomfortable. She said teachers had been coached on how to work with the script.

One parent said she had received a call from Ms. Brown indicating that her son had been asking questions, and that he met with Ms. Brown. She said she didn't know what they had discussed. Another parent said it appeared the school and District weren't prepared.

Principal Brawley said parents can contact the office if their children have questions and it's more than what parents are comfortable handling on their own. She said Ms. Brown can follow up with the parent about her son's questions, and that administration and staff have been making sure they understand what students know or think they know and what they are asking. She stressed that staff recognizes the seriousness of the situation and are anticipating as much as they can, giving the best age-appropriate answers they can, and working with parents in the process.

An attendee said she would rather discuss the situation with her child, rather than have a school social worker involved, with or without scripted answers.

Another attendee said she works in the criminal justice system, and that arrests are public information. She said the District provided no concrete information until after news reports, well after the initial arrest, and yet the script is still being formulated. She said she would prefer the school to hold assemblies for younger grades and older grades, meetings with children who had individual lessons with Mr. Gonzalez, and that a week's delay after his arrest is too long.

Ms. Ortiz apologized on behalf of the District and said information was made available as it was received and as the District was able to share it. She acknowledged that it felt unsatisfactory for parents, but stressed that the District can't talk about personnel matters.

Dr. Chapman also apologized, and explained that the District has to work with its attorneys and labor unions. She said the District provides the information it has when it can, and would have done so a week earlier if possible.

Another attendee said her third-grader came home with more detail than she would have expected, because students talk to one another.

Another attendee said he was concerned about students getting to school without being accosted by reporters. He praised the instructional quality at the school, and the music program, and asked what would be done to keep it strong; he requested that the school make sure students aren't left with a substitute for months. His comments were applauded.

Ms. White said the District would bring two music experts to the school the following day, and that they would work with Principal Brawley and students, including in the interview process but also in the classroom with students. She said these specialists would be available to the school for as long a period as Principal Brawley requires.

Principal Brawley said DCPS security would continue supporting the school as long as necessary, including to ensure that students aren't harassed.

An attendee asked what answers parents or staff could give for a kindergartener or a 5th grader asking what rape is, whether Mr. Gonzalez is guilty of the charges against him, and how a script is developed that children can understand and respond to. She also asked what DCPS procedure is when a District employee is accused of a sex crime or other offense, including whether an internal investigation is launched at the school.

Ms. Burney said she can't say whether an investigation has been launched at Shepherd. She said that if there are allegations of wrongdoing, there are procedures that include coordination with other agencies, including the Metropolitan Police Department.

Ms. Bryant-Mallory said the material sent home with parents would offer standard ways of discussing these issues with students, in factual but developmentally appropriate language.

Mr. Francis said he explained to his third-grade daughter that Mr. Gonzalez had been arrested and accused of harming someone seriously; and that he reminded her of their previous discussions about due process and how the criminal justice system works in general. He said a similar approach might work for others.

Ms. Burney noted that some students will ask questions that will not be in the script. She said the District officials recognized that they needed to work on improving and broadening the script, providing more guidance for parents and more tools, based on questions raised this evening.

Ms. Bryant-Mallory gave some examples from the script, including telling students that allegations of wrongdoing have been made against Mr. Gonzalez, and that an allegation means wrongdoing was reported but has not yet been proven or disproven. To the question of what will happen to Mr. Gonzalez, the answer would be that we don't know, and a court of law will determine whether the allegations against him are true, but that the process can be lengthy. She stressed that the script reflects information that is both factual and as much as the District and school can share.

An attendee said he isn't a parent, but a community member, and that a lot of misinformation has spread in the neighborhood, including suggestions that children may have been molested. He asked what communication would occur with neighborhood residents to ensure that incorrect information doesn't spread.

Ms. Ortiz said that those in the neighborhood with questions should reach out to the school. The attendee asked whether the District could provide information proactively. Ms. Ortiz said the District could upload information to a website.

An attendee noted that news reporters would be likely to return at key milestones in the legal process, and asked what the District and school's plan was. She also noted that she has worked in DC government for 20 years and believed the District could have provided publicly available information about the teacher's arrest in another jurisdiction, before it reached news reports.

Ms. Burney noted that the District's press secretary, Mr. Wells, was in attendance and would coordinate with the school. She said the District told the school community when officials knew something, and that District officials didn't sit on any information.

Mr. Wells said he had asked reporters with the television vans outside to be respectful. He said he would remain in touch with Principal Brawley.

Robert White introduced himself as an at-large member of the D.C. Council. He said he was tremendously concerned by the events and spoke to the DC Chancellor, saying he didn't believe parents received as much information as they should have. He said he would explore whether the District was bound by protocols that didn't let them share appropriate information. He also said the School Safety Act of 2018 expanded background checks across jurisdictions and agencies, including conversations with previous employers, although he noted it wouldn't have addressed the current situation. He also said attendees should understand the District's perspective, and that no one expected this situation to arise. He invited attendees to reach out to him if he could be of assistance.

Ms. Ortiz said the next steps would include: guidance for talking with students; additional times and locations for parent sessions with the school mental health team; additional support even if students talked with someone at school; additional information and guidance, including the script; and the phone number for the District CARE Team that could handle any concerns or complaints.

Dr. Chapman provided the team's email address and phone number for reporting any incident or issues in any school involving students or adults: dcps.care@dc.gov and 202-442-5405.

An attendee asked when the script would come out.

Ms. Bryant-Mallory said the school would begin talking with fifth graders using the script.

An attendee said she was extremely annoyed, given that the District knew Mr. Gonzalez had been arrested; officials should have arrived with tools and other resources prepared. She said her husband is an assistant U.S. Attorney, and her third-grade daughter came home and asked what rape is.

Another attendee noted that her child had concluded that he knew Mr. Gonzales and thought he was a great person, and so didn't believe the allegations; she asked that the script address such responses.

Ms. Bryant-Mallory said it would.

Principal Brawley thanked those present for attending the meeting, and promised that the school would be responsive, would communicate with parents, and would both incorporate the feedback received during the meeting and continue to listen.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:12 p.m.