

Shepherd Elementary PTO 2018–2019

- Membership meeting for Wednesday, February 27, 2019

Attendees

- Liz Bradley (President)
- Taryn Losch-Beridon (1st Vice President)
- Allison Berg (2nd Vice President)
- Andrea Smith (Treasurer)
- vacant (Assistant Treasurer)
- Karen Sloan (Corresponding Secretary)
- Theo Francis (Recording Secretary)
- Jade Brawley (SES Principal)
- Diedre Neal (Deal Middle School principal)
- Rachael Berman (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education)
- about 60 people attending

Meeting Notes

The meeting was called to order on February 27, 2019 at 6:37 PM.

Diedre Neal, principal of Alice Deal Middle School, gave a presentation with the help of several students.

Ms. Bradley introduced Rachael Berman, a community organizer for Parents Amplifying Voices in Education (PAVE). Ms. Berman explained the three-year-old organization's goal of serving as a coordinating organization to help parents inform and participate in DC schools, emphasizing that the group believes schools should be run with the families they serve, rather than for them.

She said the group seeks to make sure parents are aware of school initiatives, hearings, programs and more. PAVE's priorities are set by its parent participants. Currently those priorities include improving the resources and programs available in DCPS for social-emotional learning, and improving budget transparency.

Principal Brawley addressed public concerns about a skit proposed in one of the school's kindergarten classes that would have involved students re-enacting a Civil Rights era lunch-counter sit-in. Some parents had expressed concern, via social media, that the skit was inappropriate. Ms. Brawley noted that she had sent an email earlier in the day about the

situation, and explained the context, including the class's discussions about the 1963 March on Washington, and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s landmark speech there. She emphasized that the intent of the exercise was not to be divisive, but to capitalize on the interest the students had shown in learning about the Civil Rights Movement.

She said that because of those concerns, the skit wouldn't be performed. However, at least one media outlet had heard about the situation. She encouraged parents to talk with her and school staff about any concerns they have.

Ms. Smith said she was disappointed that the letter from Principal Brawley didn't reflect the screen-shots of ClassDojo app conversations that suggested white students were antagonizing black students. She said the message Principal Brawley sent reminded her of the school's communications surrounding the arrest last fall of a teacher, which many parents felt didn't adequately communicate what was happening.

Principal Brawley said she didn't know how the news media became aware of the issue. An attendee said the ClassDojo app screenshots had been shared on Twitter. A kindergarten parent said she hadn't been aware of the skit at all until the meeting.

Gwen Washington called it a serious problem that the school keeps appearing in the news, and said airing problems on social media doesn't help the school achieve what it wants and needs to. Another attendee emphasized the degree to which this kind of attention could undo the yearslong effort to build up the school's reputation around the neighborhood and city. She emphasized the importance of raising and solving problems within the community, because outside parties in and outside city government could use the opportunity to seek to divert resources from Shepherd.

Ms. Smith noted that it isn't clear whether parents upset about the skit had attempted to contact Principal Brawley, or whether they had done so and felt they had received insufficient response. Another attendee noted that nearly half the class was complaining because students were segregated by race, and said it would have been better to address the issue immediately by email rather than letting it simmer.

Raquel Ortiz, a member of the DCPS Community Engagement Division's Community Action Team representing Wards 1 and 4, said emails like Principal Brawley's have to be vetted and signed-off on by DCPS central office officials, and might not be phrased the way parents would prefer. She said much of what was in it may well not have come from Principal Brawley. Ms. Smith stressed that it should still address what actually happened.

Ms. Sloan asked whether any disciplinary action was taken. Principal Brawley said she isn't able to comment on personnel matters.

An attendee said that seven years ago, a school re-enacted Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on a bus, noting that it reflects historical events that children should learn about. Another attendee said she was concerned about what the students in the skit might say to one another. A third noted that re-enactments at Mt. Vernon and Colonial Williamsburg include slave auctions.

Principal Brawley stressed that she agrees an error in judgment was made, and that the teacher should have been more selective in assigning roles and steering the skit; the intent was to expose the students to a piece of history that can't be denied, but said the teacher and possibly other staff members may need additional training on simultaneously honoring black history and confronting difficult issues.

A motion was made to adjourn, and was approved by unanimous voice vote, at 8:31 PM.