

DeWitt Middle School PTA Meeting, January 14, 2013

Minutes by PTA secretary Tonya Engst

APPROVAL OF MINUTES FROM PREVIOUS MEETING

Diana Campbell motions to approve the minutes from the previous meeting. Amelia Habicht seconds. The minutes are approved.

CO-PRESIDENT'S REPORT, VANESSA WAGNER

DeWitt had a great International Night in November. Thanks to Tal Cohen and the many performers.

The 8th grade graduation promotion and reception will be held on Monday, Monday June 17, 2013, in Kulp Auditorium, at Ithaca High School. Also, there will be an 8th grade party on Wednesday June 19, at DeWitt Middle School. Karen Gorsky is heading the graduation committee; contact her at asddance@twcny.rr.com if you'd like to be on the committee or help out. [According to Karen, the exact times are still TBD.]

The PTA will be appreciating DeWitt staff with our usual luncheon in May. If you'd like to help with that, let us know.

TREASURER'S REPORT, SHIVAUN ARCHER

Reporting period from 09/01/12 - 01/14/13

Income

DeWitt PTA Membership = \$471; DeWitt Donations w/ membership = \$395

DeWitt Direct Appeal = \$1610

Donations to International Night = \$25

Advertising = \$542

iGive = \$26

T-shirt fundraiser net income = \$179

Total = \$3248

Thank you for all donations and membership. Generally we expect no more PTA fundraisers in the academic year 12-13, except direct donations facilitated by the PTA for Staff Appreciation and 8th Grade Promotion.

Expenses

Office supplies, mailing = \$172.83

NY PTA dues = \$384

Open house and welcome picnic = \$474.78

Stocking student supply cabinet = \$175

International night = \$225

Petty cash = \$18.5

Totals \$1450.11

Pending expenses for the year - mailing (~\$450), Insurance (-\$250),

Directory Printing (~\$250), Donation to DeWitt Activities (~TBD)

Balance in Bank Account (01/14/13) = \$5302.42

NATIONAL JUNIOR HONOR SOCIETY (NJHS), MRS. FEUERBACH

Mrs. Feuerbach is new at DeWitt this school year, but she led NJHS at Boynton for the last few years. Much of her discussion of NJHS is on her handout, and I've included the text from that document next. After that, these minutes continue with some q&a from the meeting.

National Junior Honor Society (NJHS), Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What is National Junior Honor Society?

A: National Junior Honor Society is a national organization dedicated to helping students achieve excellence in scholarship, leadership, service, citizenship, and character.

Q: Who can join National Junior Honor Society?

A: Students who have a 3.5 GPA or higher are invited to apply for membership at the end of their 7th or 8th grade year. Members are inducted based on their leadership, service, citizenship, and character.

Q: Why should I join National Junior Honor Society?

A: Being a part of National Junior Honor Society is an honor for you and for your family. Membership signifies that you embody the five traits (scholarship, leadership, service, citizenship, and character) and are dedicated to continuing to develop your skills in these areas. NJHS is also an excellent extracurricular organization to list on your resume for clubs or jobs in high school.

Q: What are the expectations for NJHS members?

A: Members of NJHS are expected to maintain academic excellence (3.5 GPA or higher) and exhibit overall good citizenship and character throughout the school and community. In addition, members are expected to complete at least 10 hours of community service including events at DeWitt and in the Ithaca community. These events are announced and facilitated by the NJHS advisers, although students are certainly welcome to seek out volunteer opportunities on their own.

Q: How much of a time commitment is National Junior Honor Society?

A: During the school year, NJHS members can expect to attend two meetings per month before school (8:15-8:45am), participate in at least 10 hours of community service during the school year. We make every effort to avoid conflicts with other clubs, and students have a great deal of flexibility in when and how they complete their service hours.

Q: Who do I contact if I have questions about NJHS?

A: You should contact Mrs. Feuerbach or Mrs. Chmielus.

Parents also asked a few questions at the meeting:

Q. Is NJHS is a separate organization from the high school honor society?

A. Yes.

Q. What types of activities has NJHS engaged in this school year?

A. Several, including helping with DeWitt's Food Drive, helping at the Ithaca Alternative Gift Fair, and kazoo-ing at the Annual Joe Benet Memorial Kazoo Fest to raise money for Camp Good Days. They've also been assisting 6th graders in Homework Club.

Q. What happens at NJHS meetings?

A. Officers meet every week. They plan the agendas and run the meetings, so they get leadership experience. And, the Secretary and Treasurer get experience with those jobs. All members meet twice per month. At these meetings they decide on and organize what they'll do. Sometimes community members come in to talk about an upcoming event where NJHS could participate.

Q. What is the application process?

A. Applications are mailed home to eligible students (through USPS mail), after the end of the third quarter of students' 7th grade year and 8th grade year. Students may then fill out an application. These applications are evaluated to see if the student is interested and a good match for NJHS.

Q. How does this work if you join in 7th grade vs. 8th grade?

A. 7th graders get a year of participation, during their 8th grade year. 8th graders just get to know that they were accepted; there is no program for them to participate in, in 9th grade. Students who transfer here and had joined NJHS in their previous schools can join.

Suggestion: NJHS students wear DeWitt t-shirts at events so they are easier to identify.

Suggestion: NJHS have a speaker talk to members about intellectual integrity.

PRINCIPAL'S REPORT, MR. KNIGHT

****General Report****

Mr. Knight noted accomplishments/happenings from this school year so far, including:

Food Drive: Goal was to get 4,000 cans, but end result was 1,600 cans and a \$500 donation from the Student Circle of Courage Council.

Student Council: The school's traditional student council was replaced with a more circular/horizontal group that had less vertical hierarchy with nobody being elected and everyone taking turns with facilitating. The council is asking each advisory team to come up with MLK quotes [this was detailed in the Blue Notes]. This is an active step for the council in coordinating a school-wide event.

After-School Clubs and Intramurals: This year, due to increased funding from the school district, we could hire more teachers for Homework Club, so we have included more students. In other after-school news, DeWitt can also afford to hire someone to run intramural sports, and that person will be hired soon. To some extent, the students will decide which sports, though the program could also follow gym class. DeWitt has also added fencing to our after-school program. 16 students have enrolled, so the club is full. It is a for-fee club, and the fee covers insurance.

Common Practice Development: Groups of staff within the building are working on common practices in three topic areas:

- Scheduling [the minutes circle back to this later]
- Relationships
- Grading and grade reporting. Mr. Knight feels that our report cards are vague about what is expected to be learned. He would like them to include more information and be less focused on numbers. He noted that different households tend to interpret a numerical grade, such as 78, very differently.

AVID: AVID (advancement via individual determination) is working well at IHS so they hope to expand it to middle school. At the high school, it is a 4-year curriculum that gives students who otherwise might not go to college a better chance at not only being ready to apply, but also applying, being accepted, and completing college. There are certain criteria for who is eligible. [8th grade parents, if you attended the 8th grade night at IHS recently, you got a handout about AVID; it was also noted at that meeting that for 8th grade students who the school has identified as good candidates for AVID, those families will be contacted.] Brad Granger from the ICSD Board of Education was at our PTA meeting and he described AVID thusly: The students meet at the beginning of each school day with an AVID teacher, and they cover topics like how to study and how to feel confident when asking a question in class. 20-25 students per grade are in AVID at the high school.

Math Teacher Change: Math teacher Lee Kaultman (sp?) is transferring to LACS, mid-year. To replace him with someone who can jump right in effectively, we are bringing back math teacher Ms. Hornbrook (who recently retired from DeWitt).

Reading Specialist Hire: We still have open a position for a Reading specialist 1.0. So we are looking to hire someone.

****Drama/Musical Report****

Mr. Knight had been asked to comment on what's up with musicals at DeWitt and if DeWitt is on parity with Boynton with regard to offering a musical each year. It was clarified that DeWitt has had more musicals recently than the PTA had realized, but this is still a good question because DeWitt is not having a musical this year. In the past, DeWitt has had a musical, a play, and a variety show each school year.

The problem this year is hiring. If an ICSD staff member isn't interested in the part-time position of Drama Director and/or Musical Director, then someone must be hired (also, for some musicals an Orchestra Director position must be filled). Hiring takes at least 6 weeks, and it can take several weeks more. (An ICSD staff member who is interested must still be hired, but the process is faster.)

This school year, by the time the hiring process began, it was already early September. The process went along, and ICSD has hired Ben Mumford-Zisk to serve as this year's Drama Director (for the play) and Musical Director (for the variety show), but by the time Mr. Mumford-Zisk started it was felt that there wasn't time to produce all three events, so the musical was put aside for this year. The play this year will be MacBeth, and the variety show will take place.

[According to a recent Blue Notes, "Auditions for the play will be held Tuesday and Wednesday, January 22nd and 23rd, with callbacks on Friday, January 25th. The cast list should be posted by Monday, January 28th."]

For the play, the performances dates are tentatively set for April 19-21.

For the variety show, tentative dates are: auditions on May 1 and 3, performances on June 7-9.

Suggestion: Make a plan sooner than September so that if an external hire will be needed the hiring process can begin sooner.

****Safety ****

Another topic that has been on many people's minds lately is school safety, with regard to intruders, violence, and lockdown drills. Mr. Knight talked about school safety at length.

Mr. Knight previously worked in an area where there were factors that heightened the potential for violence. So, he has training in that regard. He brought that experience to Ithaca when he came here in 2010. He is aware that our school is more open than it could be for ultra-security. But, he hasn't been focusing on that because the nature of our school seems appropriate to our community. There is a Building Safety Plan. DeWitt has a safety manual that is updated every year. This manual is submitted to the school district.

Mr. Knight had a recent meeting to discuss building security with DeWitt's office staff. After this meeting, they took the immediate measure of locking all front entrance doors except for one. They can't lock this door because it is the handicapped assistance door and the rule is to keep it open. Also, (I'm not sure if this is recent or not), the custodial entrance is kept locked, so staff must use the front door or a key. And (not sure if this is recent or not), they are discouraging the practice of wedging open a door with a brick if students go out for working in the garden, recess, or any other outdoor activity.

They also plan to upgrade the visitor pass with a pass that is laminated, larger, and more visible with a color for each day (with colors assigned to days on an ongoing random basis. So, if you keep a pass, and come back another day you will likely have the wrong color.)

DeWitt also hosts professional development classes, so we are now monitoring who these people are better.

They've also asked staff to list the vehicle that they most frequently drive so if a strange vehicle is on the property, they can more readily tell it if is staff vehicle. They've also made changes to when staff can use the building during off hours.

Each school year, each school is required to do 12 fire drills. These could be various themes, such as a missing student. However, the school is required to do only 1 lockdown drill. Mr. Knight plans to ask if this balance could be adjusted.

The discussion then became more informal with parents asking questions about what happens in a lockdown drill. A few points made were these: we hide in classrooms because the walls make the people inside invisible. The police want you to stay put, also, so they can easily identify intruders. Running to safety is a bad idea, and in some cases intruders have targeted people exiting the building. Students should not use their mobile phones because it ties up 911 and because parents should not come to the school until it is secure as they will only be in the way.

Suggestion: Have officers come to the school to talk with students about the reasons for the way the lockdowns are conducted. They could explain to students what students can best help police resolve the situation safely. This would be meant to be collaborative and informative.

Suggestion: Have another PTA meeting where the main topic is helping adults better understand lockdown drills so we can communicate about them with students in a way that makes the most sense for the individual student. Parent Mary Beth Tierney has participated in the Active Shooter program at Cornell and she thought that a video she saw there might be useful to show here. Also, perhaps Cornell police could do a program.

Question: Is there any counseling in place at school?

Answer: Yes. We have a crisis team. Staff are asked to keep a look out for kids who might be upset and to pass that along.

Question: Some of the shootings in other communities have been done by students. What about anger monitoring and control, and what about bullying? Is there a program at school to help kids with anger control?

Answer: We have an anti-bullying program. We cannot always anticipate or prepare for the full range of human behavior. This is very challenging. Educate, raise awareness, create community -- these are all good things to do.

[The PTA board would like to develop a FAQ or other handout for adults to go over with children, to answer common questions and help students be more prepared to think smart and do the right thing in a real emergency. Is there a parent who could help with this? Perhaps someone with a strong personal interest or related professional background?]

****Musical Offerings for 6th Graders****

DeWitt offers students several optional classes related to music. The basic offerings are Choir, Orchestra, and Band. Although students are not required to take any of these, students in past recent years could take any two of them or even (usually) any three. And, 7th and 8th graders this year can do so as well. [It is my impression that 8th graders taking Earth Science and thus having Earth Science *class* and *lab* may (in some cases) not be able to take all three.]

But, this year 6th graders can take only one of these special offerings. So, for example, if a student played violin and loved to sing, he would have to choose between Orchestra and Choir. Or, a student learning an orchestra and a band instrument could join only the Orchestra or the Band, and thus have to choose which instrument they wanted to focus on in school.

An outstanding question is whether for this year's 6th graders if the choice of any, any two, or all three will be available in 7th grade next school year. [After the meeting, I asked Mr. Knight for clarification, but didn't receive a reply at the time when I posted these minutes.]

Also, a change for this year's 6th grade students is that they receive only 10 weeks of general music class (all students take this as part of the curriculum) instead of 20 weeks as the 6th grade has in the past.

Mr. Knight explained that three circumstances caused these changes for 6th graders this year. [I am not clear on if all circumstances caused all the changes, or if it is more nuanced.]

- 6th grade teachers must be certified as 6th grade teachers. (So, someone who is qualified to teach at the 7th/8th grade level might not be qualified for 6th grade.)
- There is a general, ongoing concern among many members of our community, including Mr. Knight, that the transition of students from 5th to 6th grade is too abrupt and that 6th graders ought to have a less hectic schedule with less coping related to big backpacks and short times to change classes. For this school year, the 6th grade team was challenged to devise a new schedule that would be less hectic. Also, a schedule that would support having two teams per grade. They did and are trying it on this year's 6th grade. [Teams were discussed more fully in the Sep-2012 minutes.]
- DeWitt was identified as a SINI school. School In Need of Improvement. Not enough students scoring at a level 3 or 4 on the ELA (English Language Assessment. In addition to the specific demographic flagged by our SINI score, there is this statistic that was shared with meeting attendees: out of approximately 180 students entering the 6th grade, 65–70 of them are level

1 or 2. [I don't know if these numbers are for this year's 6th grade, or last year's. But they should be similar regardless.] Mr. Knight spoke about how kids who enter middle school with this kind of score need a lot of help, because if they don't pull it up by high school, they have a big problem with potentially life-long consequences. He felt that the school has an obligation to do all it can to get these kids where they ought to be. [The conversation in the meeting circled back to this concern several times, and I wish I could have typed fast enough to quote Mr. Knight here, as he had a great deal to say and he was eloquent.] Mr. Knight also expressed that juxtaposing the need for enrichment versus the desire to have multiple musical offerings could be polarizing and he seeks a non-polarizing solution.

A consequence of the above-listed three factors was a new schedule for 6th graders that increased instructional time and [I think as a side-effect] 6th graders lost the flexibility in the schedule to join more than one special music option.

Mr. Knight noted that it is mid-year, so it is a good time to reflect on how things are going. Recall that one of the Common Practices groups noted earlier in the meeting is working on scheduling. So, feedback to that group about students being able to choose multiple special music options is something that they could consider. [I do not know to whom, or how, that feedback might be registered.]

The PTA had expressed concern that Boynton and DeWitt were not having similar offerings for music. This was partly related to the 6th grade situation and related to the lack of a musical this year. Mr. Knight said that this concern was new to him. However, he would be meeting shortly with Mr. Brown and Ms. Carruthers (Boynton principal) to talk about alignment of the schools.

Apparently, while DeWitt makes all 6th graders take 10 weeks of music (this is a state requirement) and offers choir optionally, Boynton has a different policy wherein students may take either music or choir (so whatever happens in choir, it meets the state music requirement). So, it is difficult to exactly compare instructional time or student: teacher ratios between the two schools.

Comments: Several people expressed that it seemed unimportant to compare DeWitt to Boynton at this time, especially since the lack of a musical is a one-time situation, not a change in policy going forward. They said that the focus should be on what we can do at DeWitt. Nobody contradicted this point of view.

Comment: Offering multiple music options to 6th graders, as we have in the past, would honor a child's time investment with an instrument (or instruments) in elementary school.

Comment: It is unfortunate and difficult that a child would have to choose between singing and playing an instrument, especially at this age.

Comment: I see that you are stuck between a rock and a hard place. I find it a shame that the arts are often considered a frivolity -- and get cut first. I'm a scientist at Cornell. My best science students are often musical and play instruments.

Comment: I wonder if there's a way in the 6th grade orientation to help parents help their kids, to improve the first year. So parents are more aware of what kinds of support kids need.

Comment: Students who most need support are least likely to have parents show up for a parent orientation, or read related materials.

Question: What can be done so that next year's 6th graders will be able to pick more than one instrument?

Comment: My children are 6th graders and they love general music class. They are also in band and they love it.

Question: What's the enrichment period for 6th graders?

Answer: Students who are in need get academic support. Students can do homework. ELA is now two periods together (reading and English)instead of two separate periods.

Insight: There might be some wiggle room in 9th period.

Comment/Question: During enrichment my daughter does orchestra, or she gets math enrichment. Are parents are aware of what the enrichment period opportunities are?

Question: Could there be an after-school club for kids missing an instrument? Or after-school choir? (IHS does this for choir.)

Comment: Could the school publish for all parents to know what are the special musical opportunities? (i.e. Jazz Band)

Comment: Even for kids who aren't that strong academically, taking them away from the arts is a loss for those kids, especially those kids where arts are an area where they can excel.

Mr. Woodridge: Could 9th period be when kids who want to be in choir could come? A number of 6th graders who wanted to be in choir this year couldn't be. Mr. W and Mr. K are going to talk about this. [Mr. Woodridge is a music teacher at DeWitt.]

Comment: Music contributes a great deal to brain development.

[My apologies to anyone whose comment I omitted or misconstrued. I thought there were a lot of excellent comments!]