

Upper School Parents' Association

Meeting Minutes

October 3, 2017

Upper School Parents' Association Executive Committee Members Present:

- Ann Jenness
- Leah Goldberg
- Claire Walton
- Karen Falcone and Libby Albright

Featured speaker:

Heather Flewelling - Director of Multiculturalism and Community Development

- President's Welcome - Ann Jenness
Meeting was called to order at 7:00 p.m.

I. Update: Service and Engagement Trips

Heather made announcements on behalf of Andrea Geyling - Moore regarding the spring break trip for community engagement. Heather reiterated the goals of service trips which are to find new and meaningful ways of engaging, and to challenge students' perceptions of what they think they know. These opportunities find ways of creating cognitive dissonance while maintaining a sense of safety.

While tropical locations are desirable and Milton has partnerships abroad (for example, in Belize), the decision has been made to turn our attention inward again this year. Locations in Houston were identified as good partners for financial donation, but are not quite ready from an infrastructure perspective to welcome high school students for service engagement. Therefore, students will return to New Orleans this year and continue to work with the same partner following hurricane Katrina. The nature of the work will likely be building and tutoring, and the trip will take place during the first week of March vacation.

In addition to the spring break opportunity, there will be another trip in early June to New Mexico. Students will work on a Native American reservation with an alum who has a community connection there.

Information sessions will be held on Friday and Saturday of Parents' Weekend. Any further questions can be directed to Andrea.

II. Discussion of Work on Diversity and Inclusion

Heather shared the challenges facing the Milton community, as well as the goals and progress of her team.

Parents in attendance articulated topics of interest to them, including:

- the climate of the school community and student body this Fall
- feedback on the visiting speaker, Rodney Glasgow, who is a noted facilitator in the areas of diversity and social justice. Milton has employed Rodney to deliver presentations and workshops to assist the Milton community in navigating the recent challenges experienced
- ways in which the school can bring students and faculty together
- the events of last spring and follow-up action items
- recent incidents on Centre Street.

Challenges

Heather discussed the challenge of diversity inclusion work, and emphasized the need to create spaces and structures that respond to as many perspectives and needs as possible. We live in a time right now that feels increasingly polarized. Historically, independent schools were quite homogeneous and there could be operating assumptions about common experience. As small groups of students started to attend (i.e. students of color, different religious backgrounds, etc.) a change occurred in trends and experiences. Milton has seen significant demographic shifts over the last 10 years including:

- socioeconomic: 35% of upper school students receive some form of financial aid
- racial / ethnic: 43% students of color and 19% faculty of color
- gender: 50% male, 50% female
- wide range of identities: nationality, religion, sexuality, gender identity, etc.

Members of our community come from different backgrounds with different needs. Therefore, students experience the school differently and programming needs to respond to this. Young people are in a rapid development period, while many adults working with them may not have grown up or been educated in a space like this.

There is not a lot of precedent for this work, and schools are doing different things based on their populations, so there is no established “best practice”.

Heather explained that another challenge of diversity work is the tendency of our brains to sort and classify information, and to judge. Our brains will naturally group, rank, and look for common factors or ways of understanding a situation. Heather touched on programs such as PROJECT IMPLICIT that help us go deeper than this surface reaction, and better understand biases around certain groups. How can we raise awareness of bias and interrupt it?

Heather briefly recapped the events of last spring and how this sparked a broader conversation within the school. Many students felt that awareness was not where it should be around issues of identity and culture. A 2 day student sit-in was an empowering experience for some, but alienating and challenging for others. The experience brought about ways of engaging in deeper work on this.

Goals / Progress

- 1) Changes to Student Handbook - language has been reviewed and revised to make clear the expectations around language, imagery, and behavior. The handbook also contains additional language around school responses.
- 2) Additional Multiculturalism Staff - Heather’s focus on building a diverse staff brings different perspectives to the work and helps students see themselves represented in this office. New team

members include: Ilan Rodriguez, Suzanne DeBuhr, Tasha Otenti, Tasheana Dukuly, and Mark Heath.

- 3) Outside Diversity Speakers / Educators - Rosetta Lee and Rodney Glasgow will visit Milton 7-8 times during this school year.
 - Rosetta Lee began work in August providing enhanced training and education for faculty.
 - Rodney Glasgow began work today with students and staff. He focused on learning to be in dialogue with one another. He emphasized the importance of asking questions that truly help us understand the perspectives of another person. One activity had some students share their positions on important issues (i.e. pro-choice vs. pro-life, incarceration vs. death penalty, black lives matter vs. blue lives matter, etc.) while others asked questions. This work revealed the tensions that arise when one's opinion or stance intersects with another's identity. Rodney's message was to stay in conversation, and develop a set of skills for doing this effectively.
- 4) Commitment to incorporating this diversity inclusion work into the curriculum, Affective Education program, and professional development for faculty. Curriculum and programming review will begin with Class 4 to create cultural competency in our students.

Heather briefly discussed the events on Centre Street. Inappropriate comments were directed to members of our community from passing cars. Thanks to increased camera coverage on campus the school was able to provide video information to the Milton Police Department. The recent incident remains under investigation. Milton Academy is not a closed campus, so the school will continue to monitor activity, work on response, and keep the community informed.

III. Q & A

Q: As kids embark on cultural conversations there is often a backlash when they say the “wrong” thing. How does Milton promote understanding that everyone will “mess up” at some point and that we’re all growing and learning?

Heather: There is emphasis on the idea that diversity is a conversation for ALL of us. Start with good intent, then attempt to be thoughtful and responsible with behavior and words. Learn to ask questions that decrease the likelihood of “going on the attack”. Be mindful that words and behaviors can have an impact, and we must learn to take responsibility and apologize. We also need to learn to forgive.

Q: What is the role of faculty and school leaders in diversity assemblies? Sometimes opinions or positions expressed by adults are in direct conflict with the identity of a student. There also seems to be a lack of time for adequate discussion built into these activities.

Heather: There are different perspectives on when and how adults and educators share their beliefs with students. The perception can be that this adult doesn't like me or understand me, so there really needs to be time to process and discuss. Time to discuss these positions is important for full understanding, and students should never feel unsupported by teachers. Affective Education classes at each grade level are appropriate spaces for these discussions, and the Advisory period is another time for this processing to happen.

Q: Understanding and appreciating the differences between us is important. There is difference all around, but there are also things we share. Is there a space to come together? Can we focus on the common ground?

Heather: Students are coming together often in ways that we just don't discuss as part of our diversity inclusion work. These opportunities exist on sports teams, in musical groups, clubs, and during other

extra-curricular activities. Spirit days are also times that we unite as a community. We need to keep thinking about more ways to come together, make connections, and practice the positivity.

IV. Conclusion

Heather summarized by saying that diversity inclusion work is challenging but rewarding as a wider range of people express an interest in doing this work better. Milton continues to focus on the student experience - creating spaces where practice can happen, considering program shifts, and expanding staff to support our students. The goal is for the work to continue and change to be sustainable!

A parent letter will be distributed in the coming weeks with more information.

V. Information, Reports and Announcements – USPA Volunteers

1. Approval of Minutes from September 19th USPA meeting; now on website.
2. Upper School Parents' Association Coffee, held on Mon., Sept. 25th was well attended.
 - Encouraging Class Reps to help organize informal coffees off-campus
3. Parents' Independent School Network ("PIN") – Christina Taborsky, PIN Rep
 - Handouts of PIN meetings schedule for the year
 - The schedule is also on the Parents page of Milton's website.
4. Parents' Weekend (Oct. 12, 13, 14):
 - RSVP deadline for Class Dinners/Class Social is TOMORROW!***
 - NEW: Combined Class I & II Social – Thurs., 10/12, 6:30 p.m., Wigg
 - Class III Dinner – Thurs., 10/12, 6:30 p.m., CSG
 - Class IV Dinner – Thurs., 10/12, 6:30 p.m., RSG – *Jen Jordan*
 - All Parents Reception – Fri., Oct. 13, 4:30 – 5:45 p.m., RSG
 - Boarding Parents' Receptions – Fri., Oct. 13, 5:45 - 6:45 p.m., Houses
 - Chili/Cornbread – Sat., Oct. 14, 11:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m., Student Center
 - Athletic Liaisons planning field-side hospitality.
5. Senior Showcase – Raffle donations needed – Nina Panarese, Class I Day Rep
6. Faculty and Staff Appreciation Day – Veronica Geroukas, co-chair
7. Next USPA Meeting: Tues., Nov. 14, 7:00 p.m.:
 - Andrea Geyling-Moore: Director, Upper School Community Engagement Programs and Partnerships
 - Lisa Winick: Development, Chief Advancement Officer
8. Reminder: All of this information, including Meeting Minutes, can be found on the Parents page of Milton's website.
9. Ann Jenness asked if anyone had questions and welcomed open discussion.
 - Finding none, the meeting was adjourned at 8:43 p.m.

Office of Multiculturalism and Community Development

<http://www.milton.edu/about/diversity-at-milton/>

Milton Mission:

Milton Academy cultivates in its students a passion for learning and a respect for others. Embracing diversity and the pursuit of excellence, we create a community in which individuals develop competence, confidence and character. Our active learning environment, in and out of the classroom, develops creative and critical thinkers, unafraid to express their ideas, prepared to seek meaningful lifetime success and to live by our motto, "Dare to be true."

Current Diversity Mission:

Diversity is central to Milton Academy's mission; we work actively to create an inclusive community of students and adults from a spectrum of cultures and backgrounds. We believe this work is essential to foster mutual respect, responsibility and empathy in our School and in the world our graduates will enter.

As part of our common educational commitment, we give voice and respect to people representing a breadth of race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, family structure, socio-economic status, physical ability, and religious and political affiliation. Our community welcomes those who keep their minds and hearts open to difference.

Staffing:

Ilan Rodriguez joined us August 1 as the new Director of Student Multicultural Programming. Ilan serves as the primary point person for Upper School student work. The Upper School team also includes Suzanne DeBuhr (faculty engagement), Tasheana Dukuly (culture groups and office newsletter/communications), Mark Heath (engaging various dominant identities, e.g. white students, males), Tasha Oteni (international student coordinator).

External support and community education:

We have many people within our school who are working hard to build capacity in this work. Internal strength and commitment are critical, but so too is utilizing other voices to be more objective in identifying our strengths and weaknesses and push us even more. With external support we will provide our community with more breadth and depth.

The external support will provide additional education for our staff and faculty to be better able to engage, teach and support our community.

This year we are fortunate to work with two nationally recognized diversity and inclusion leaders in independent schools: Rodney Glasgow and Rosetta Lee. Rodney and Rosetta will each be here roughly 4 times this year. Each visit they will work with some combination of adults and students, and will provide perspectives and skills through which we can all improve our cultural competence and learn more about how we can grow. We began the year with all staff and faculty reading *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* and followed in opening meetings with a full day of Rosetta Lee addressing issues of identity development and cross-cultural communication. She will be here again next week, October 10, March 27 and 28.

Rodney joined us today for a day of work with all three divisions. His work in the upper school focused on navigating discussion in a polarized time. He focused on the importance of learning to ask the best

questions to broaden our understanding of the perspectives of others rather than looking for opportunities to "win" a debate or argument. He will also be with us February 8, April 19 and May 12.

We will have the opportunity to also hear from other resource people over the course of the year, and many community members will take advantage of off campus trainings, and bring those lessons back to us as well.

Student leadership:

Each division is exploring ways in which we can build the capacity of our students to develop and practice a range of skills that will assist them in deepening their self-awareness, their awareness of the experiences and perspectives of others, and the skills that will help them navigate the space between them. The divisions are committed to creating spaces that will give students opportunities to explore their identities, to engage in conversation across these groups, and to celebrate the richness of our many cultures. This may be in affinity and culture groups, in initiatives that students reflect on and share aspects of culture and identity through their curricular projects, or open community dialogue on identity, culture and difference. We will also send students to a range of off-campus conferences to learn and share more with peers from other schools.

Strategic plan:

A main goal will be the expanded team and board committee finalizing the strategic plan for diversity and inclusion and developing implementation plan and clear goals and objectives.

Institutional leadership:

I am pleased to announce that this fall we will be convening a Board Diversity Committee. We are appreciative that Randall Dunn and Sylvia Westphal have agreed to co chair the committee. We are finalizing a charge and board composition, and are excited that this level of school leadership is eager to help guide and support our diversity and inclusion work. For our trustees to engage more deeply in this work themselves, and to help hold us accountable to direction and outcome is an important step for us. They are eager and committed to this effort and to shape their role as supports to our ongoing work.

A few of the additional threads of exploration:

Cultural Competency

Moving beyond diversity as simply a value statement and moving toward additional focus on Cultural Competency

Political correctness and civil discourse

Addressing the concept that political correctness is not about censorship, but citizenship. A focus of the year will be providing more spaces for students to learn how to engage in discussion around issues of identity in ways that allow for expression of various ideas while also recognizing the tension between "opinion" and "identity".

Affinity space

While much of our work is to build a cohesive larger Milton community, there remains a value and important role for various groups to have affinity spaces to ground and support their particular experiences, traditionally as historically marginalized communities. Exploration around new spaces for additional work will be considered.

