



JUNEAU SCHOOL DISTRICT

Montessori Borealis Site Council

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Montessori Borealis Site Council work session on Lottery rules Meeting Summary

Date & Time: January 9, 2010 8:00 - 10:45 am in the AMP classroom at Marie Drake

Attending

Site Council members: Barbara Thurston, Stephanie Allison, Darla Madden, Alicia Smith, Anastasia Lynch

Teachers: Chris Trostel, Annabel Rondeau, Debbie Chalmers, Mary Jane Tenning, Dayna Weiler, Cory Crossett

JMS Teachers/Staff: Lupita Alvarez, Andrea Stats

Others: Stephanie Kohlhase, Thea Howard, Fred Weiler, Susan Erben, Di Johnson, Santé Lesh, Chuck Burnham, Brenda Edwards, Robin MacDonald

Summary of Discussion

Opening Comments: Stephanie Allison explained the purpose of the meeting – this is a work session, and no decisions will be made. The purpose is to give families who are concerned about the lottery an opportunity to share their thoughts with the site council.

There are two separate issues regarding the lottery: 1) whether or not the district is currently following the lottery rules as written, and 2) whether the lottery rules as written are appropriate.

The first of these was addressed during the last site council meeting. We have some concerns that the procedures and computer program in use are not in compliance with the written rules and are working with Laury Scandling on this issue. This work session is focused on the second question.

The site council has several options concerning the lottery

- Do nothing
- Ask for minor non-substantive changes
- Ask for major changes – this will required board involvement

We discussed the option of doing nothing or asking for minor changes now, while having a longer-term goal of making more substantive changes

Stephanie pointed out that different subgroups of people have different points of view on many of the lottery issues. Comments were (generally) separated into those from the different subgroups, though suggestions were discussed as they were brought up.

Teachers' perspectives:

Mary Jane: Historical perspective: when the Montessori program came to Marie Drake (08/09) the school board decided that diversity kids could keep getting admitted during the school year, even if the classroom is officially "full". This could be a problem if and when the program becomes over-represented with a particular category of diversity students.

She would like a requirement that parents become informed consumers about the program before enrolling their kid by meeting or talking with the teachers.

Annabel: Comes from Milwaukee which has a huge public Montessori program (same percent of public school kids are in Montessori as in Juneau but with a much larger student population), the lottery is very different there. She'll get us the specifics of the lottery rules. Prior Montessori experience is part of the lottery – hard to get in after age 5.

Debbie: Her main concern is how late the August lottery is held – we've lost kids because they can't wait until the week before school starts to find out they are admitted.

Chris: Gave history – when program started, it was mainly due to the district's desire for numbers and money (we brought in 17 new kids). SEAFOM was asked to assist the district in writing the first lottery (93/94) – based on Anchorage's lottery. The preference included prior Montessori experience, sibling, ethnicity, Harborview boundary area. In 2004/05 (after district concern about expanding to a 3rd classroom) a committee was formed to review lottery – added income, spec ed, achievement as preferences, and removed ethnicity and prior Montessori experience. The new lottery procedure is much longer and it's run behind closed doors.

There is a fundamental distrust between the district and Montessori (and probably JCCS) – they keep thinking we're trying to get away with something. We distrust them because we don't think they are following their own procedures.

The lottery needs to become more transparent – held in public. Rules need to be made much shorter and less complicated. Deadlines haven't once been met with the new lottery – need to be. Data entering (required before lottery can be run) is a problem. The number of applicants should be public information. Teachers are supposed to be able to check data for currently enrolled students used in the lottery before the lottery is run to check for errors – that hasn't been happening, but needs to.

Turning in applications is a barrier for some families since applications must go to a school office or to central office. Applications and info about the program is not really available at every school. Parents are not supposed to give applications to Montessori teachers. This should be allowed for parents who are comfortable with the Montessori teachers seeing their applications and could

reduce barriers for families. It would be helpful for families to be able to fill out and submit an application online.

Teachers want families to be required to meet with teachers prior to putting in applications. This is the norm in other public programs around the country. Yaakoosge (and formerly Phoenix, and other special programs around the country) requires additional application procedures, so there is a precedent for this. Teachers should be notified of who has been admitted in a timely fashion so that they can chat with the parents about the program.

Determining the number of openings has traditionally been done by the program. Last year, central office decided where the last few openings would be. The program must be able to specify where the openings are based on various needs.

The exhibit published by the district that shows diversity characteristics for the Montessori program versus other schools or the district as a whole should be clarified as to which characteristics are subject to lottery preferences and which are not. Maybe split into two exhibits? Since “kids not meeting CORE” is a lottery preference it should be included on the exhibit. The exhibit should also have “kids with 504 plans” added to it for comparison purposes.

Dayna: Wants “underrepresented” added to the sentence in the lottery rules dealing with late added kids.

Cory: Dayna’s issue is the most important thing to be changed.

District’s perception is that JMS parents tend to be more affluent, and it doesn’t seem fair to give them a preference over other kids. This perception may or may not be accurate.

Montessori teachers want to see more children with prior Montessori education (not just JMS but any other Montessori school) entering the program in order to improve and maintain the integrity of the Montessori program. The foundation of any Montessori program is the pre-school component, when children learn what’s expected in a Montessori classroom, how to use the materials, how to function independently and how to contribute to the classroom community.

If a classroom does not have a critical mass of students with previous Montessori experience, the class is no longer able to function as a true Montessori program. So, in effect, the lottery as it is currently run may be harming the students that it is designed to help--i.e., those who meet diversity criteria who receive the most benefit from a Montessori education.

JSD perspective:

Barbara gave a summary of the JSD perspective – the district considers it more important that our classes reflect the population of the district than it is for each applying child to have an equal opportunity of getting in. Thea added that the district is driven by money and resources and that there is a fear of optional programs taking resources from other schools or programs.

Non-JMS Parents' perspective:

Stephanie Allison summarized some of the concerns that non-JMS parents have about the possibility of adding a lottery preference for "prior Montessori experience". She handed out statistics showing the numbers of JMS students who have applied to the public program compared to the number who were accepted into the program. Most JMS students who have applied in recent years have gotten in – generally one or two per year do not.

If a prior Montessori preference were added, students who didn't meet a diversity preference and didn't have prior Montessori experience (due to finances, their parent's work schedules, their parent's choice of childcare, or whatever other reason) would have little chance to get in unless they had a sibling preference.

Barbara pointed out that there is already a "hidden" JMS preference due to the late date of the August lottery. By the week before school starts, many families that were on the wait list in May have made other plans and will turn down a spot if it is offered. JMS parents are much more likely to "wait out the crowd" and accept a spot in the program even if it's offered at the last minute (or after school starts). It was pointed out that while this "hidden" preference does help some JMS families, it doesn't help all of them.

JMS Staff's perspectives:

Lupita: Currently there is reverse discrimination since middle class kids aren't getting an equal chance of getting in. She proposes changing the schedule of the lottery to earlier so families know earlier whether their kid got in. The district needs to give better info to the community about optional programs. The lottery rules should be re-written in a way that is clearer and simpler. Teachers need to be able to review student data ahead of the time the lottery is run. Children should be enrolled from the bottom up (i.e. starting with the youngest age in a classroom)

Andrea: Lottery been an issue for years. Her perspective is that by going to JMS, kids are already in the Montessori family and should not be turned away from the district program. Turning JMS kids down hurts the E1 classes since fewer kids with prior Montessori experience means that there are more kids who aren't familiar with the classroom environment.

Comments from JMS parents:

There is a widespread desire to add a lottery preference for "prior Montessori experience" – families have chosen Montessori for their children and that choice should be respected by the district.

The enrollment process isn't really a lottery, since not all kids have an equal chance of getting in. The label should be changed to reflect that.

Would it be possible to expand the low income preference to include JMS kids who are receiving a scholarship? Such an expansion would probably have to be worded in such a way (maybe by income level) so that children around the district were eligible for that preference, not just children whose parents chose JMS.

If there is a goal to give a prior Montessori preference, is there a way to do that indirectly – similar to how the district has eliminated ethnicity as a preference but hopes to effectively increase ethnic diversity using income, ELL, or another of the preferences currently in use?

Saturday morning is difficult meeting time for some families, so future meetings should be held at a different time.

Meetings need to be better advertised

A parent pointed out that the JMS parents and staff making comments at this meeting were speaking for themselves – the JMS board has not rendered an official position at this time.

Conclusion:

The site council will need to discuss this and make a decision as to how to act (both for now, and possibility for later, as well). This may be discussed at the next site council meeting on 1/18, or a special site council meeting may be scheduled to address it.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommended changes in administrative procedures:

- Move August lottery earlier (could be a procedure change if new date fits within current rules)
- Make lottery more transparent by holding it in public while keeping student/family information confidential
- District needs to meet lottery deadlines for running lottery and notifying families and programs
- Data required for lottery needs to be entered in a timely manner so as to not disrupt scheduled deadlines
- The number of applicants should be made public
- Teachers should be provided with the opportunity to check data on existing students to confirm it is correct before running lottery
- Allow Montessori teachers to collect lottery applications and forward them to central office
- Create a system allowing families to fill out and submit applications online.
- Teachers should be notified as soon as a child is offered a spot so they can contact families to welcome the family, answer questions about the program, etc.
- Teachers should have the final say on how program openings are distributed by grade
- Information about alternative programs needs to be better disseminated to families and children in the community.
- District exhibit showing diversity characteristics by program or school should clearly indicate which characteristics are and are not subject to lottery preferences. In particular, ethnicity is not given a lottery preference so should not be combined with statistics on characteristics for which a preference is given. “Kids with 504 plans” and “kids not meeting CORE” should be added to the district’s diversity exhibit(s).

Recommended changes to written lottery rules or preferences:

- Move August lottery earlier (might require a change to current rules)
- Add requirement that parents be required to meet or talk with teachers about the Montessori program before applying or enrolling their child in the program
- Rules need to be re-written and simplified to be easier to understand
- Add “under-represented” to the language clarifying which diversity characteristics qualify a child to be added to a “full” classroom after the school year starts
- Add a preference for “prior Montessori experience” to the lottery preferences
- Change the terminology used by the district to replace the term “lottery” with “enrollment process” or something to indicate that student placement is not done totally randomly.
- Raise the cutoff for the low-income preference so that families that receive JMS scholarships can qualify for the preference