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Takoma Park Elementary School

PTA Meeting Minutes

September 1, 2009

The meeting was called to order at 7:05 p.m. by PTA President Shruti Bhatnagar. She thanked everyone for coming and introduced several guests, including Todd Watkins, Director of Transportation for Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and Robin Patiner, TPES contact at MCPS Transportation Department. She then turned the meeting over to TPES Principal Zadia Gadsden.

Ms. Gadsden began by expressing empathy for parents' worry and fears while waiting for their children to return home from school on the first two days of school. She reported that on the first day of school, out of 417 children who needed to get on their correct method of transportation home, the school did not send five on their correct method (on their end). On the second day, that number was down to one out of 417. She noted, however, that their goal is zero.

Ms. Gadsden reported that one of the most difficult situations they face is children who go to a different place every day of the week and she asked that parents consider that a schedule that changes that much may be hard on the children as well. She asked that parents try not to call at the last minute with changes in their children's plans and instead send a note in with their child in the morning. She also asked parents to encourage day care providers to send a list of who they are expecting to help the school make sure those students get on the right bus for that provider. She reported on other challenges they are facing and asked parents to be as patient as possible. She stated that parents should call the phone number for the Grosvenor holding school (301.571.6920) if they have any questions about their children or their buses and not the old number for TPES. Although the old TPES number rings at Grosvenor, it only rings on one line (only one call gets through at a time and any other calls coming in ring for the caller but cannot be heard and answered at the school) whereas the main Grosvenor number rings on all other lines at the school.

In response to questions, Ms. Gadsden noted that the ConnectEd call and email with the list of bus departure times was meant to be helpful and said that the 4:15 departure for one of the buses was the result of Transportation's efforts to make sure the right students were on that bus (although she noted that generally she could not speak for Transportation and would have to defer some questions to the two individuals from Transportation. Ms. Gadsden walked through the procedure for dismissing the children, noting that all classes are offered an opportunity to eat a snack they brought with them (the school does not provide snacks) prior to dismissal. She also explained all of the steps they take to make sure kids get on the right bus, including organizing them in rooms by bus color with colored necklaces (except that 2nd graders are in the all purpose room because the portables are too far away), calling the buses by color for loading, and removing the colored necklaces as kids board the bus to make sure they're getting on the right color bus. Finally, Ms. Gadsden said that the school would send home a list of the bus color/number combinations so that parents would know which color bus goes with which bus schedule/number. And, she said that she would be in Takoma Park the next day to observe bus arrivals.

When the questions switched to ones that were better addressed to Transportation, Ms. Gadsden turned the meeting over to Mr. Watkins. Mr. Watkins explained the steps they had taken on the second day to make sure that all children rode the correct bus and got off at the correct stop. He also explained the process for locating buses and provided numbers for the night duty manager (310.840.8130) and school security (301.279.3232) so that parents always have a number to call that will be answered if they have any questions about the whereabouts of a bus or a child after school hours. He said that they have managed other bussing situations where students had to be bussed equally far to a holding school, but that they had not had another one where all the children were so young (he noted that most elementary schools in the county are K-5 schools rather than K-2 schools).

Mr. Watkins answered other questions about how much training drivers receive and what their qualifications are. He noted that they have discretion as to the route they take and choose routes, including the beltway, based on traffic patterns at the time they are driving. He also stated that MCPS does not have live GPS capability for buses but hopes to in the future if they have the resources. Mr. Watkins reported that they will be making changes to bus routes after they have had a week to assess how efficient and crowded they are and that no changes will be made before parents are notified. He also stated that he expects all children to arrive in Takoma Park by 4:15 to 4:30 once everything is ironed out.

Ms. Gadsden answered questions about discipline related to bus behavior and how she imposes appropriate consequences when there are problems on the bus. She also noted that Ms. Golden assists when children are upset about other children's behavior on the bus.

Mrs. Bhatnagar closed the meeting by noting that she was very concerned with the transportation issues that came up on the first day. She told every one that she had been at the school both days, helping children get to their classrooms, checking their bus info and working along with the staff. She observed arrival and dismissal from beginning to end on both days and was very impressed with how the teachers and staff managed to maintain a sense of calm and comfort for the children despite the amount of stress they were under.

Mrs. Bhatnagar also noted that she had printed out or written down all parent concerns expressed to her and on the list serve to make sure that were all immediately addressed. She discussed all issues with Mr. Watkins to make sure that they are not repeated and mentioned that he was very cooperative and working on a plan to resolve the issues.

Mrs. Bhatnagar also thanked Ms. Gadsden and the staff for working so hard to make sure that the transportation issues get resolved.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:30pm.