

# Ellon Academy Parent Council Minutes

**15<sup>th</sup> December 2020**

All participants took part virtually due to current Government guidance on social distancing. Attendance was open to **all** parents or guardians who have children at the school. Parents were asked to contact in advance to note interest so that invitations could be sent through emails.

**Attendees:** N Topping (Chair), D McCulloch (Vice Chair), K Gray (Previous Chair), H Wilson (Acting Secretary), A Blanchard (Treasurer), P Buchan (Rector), T Booth (DHT), M Sturton, D Bain, G Burgess, S Middleton

**Apologies:** L Gill

Please note that this meeting took place before the announcement that pupils would be delayed returning to school after the Christmas break and before the new lockdown was communicated.

## **1. Minutes of the previous meeting**

These were posted on the Parent Council Facebook Page, School website and emailed to parents and no alterations were suggested.

## **2. Treasurer's Report**

**No update from November position**

## **3. Rector's Update**

### **Staffing**

Mr Coe is joining us from Aberdeen Grammar School as Principal Teacher of Pupil Development. This new role in the school is to include:

- Work with the Guidance team
- Responsibility for Restorative approaches
- Alternatives to exclusion
- Review of use of the Reconnect room
- Use of internal exclusions where appropriate
- Arranging alterations to curriculum where required
- Reparation work
- Wider achievement development
- In-house school provision for Keyworker and Vulnerable pupils

He has extensive experience from his previous school

Ms K Bond is joining us from a school in the Highlands where she was Principal Teacher of Science. She can teach all three sciences.

Mr M Sellen has moved from his English teacher post to become an Additional Support for Learning teacher. He will be focussed on supporting identified S4 pupils who, currently have not been meeting attainment targets. He has already been able to meet with some pupils and has written to parents inviting them to take part in the school's GOALS programme.

We have a new English teacher joining us from Northfield Academy.

Mr G Wilson (one of our Pupil Support Workers) is leaving Ellon Academy to take up his new position as Counsellor for Mintlaw Academy.

There will be an advert seeking to recruit a new Pupil Support worker.

Ellon Academy has not been assigned a Counsellor as Aberdeenshire Council were only able to recruit two Counsellors for the whole of the local authority area so far.

Mrs L Jaffrey is moving on to a temporary Pupil Support Worker post in Fraserburgh.

Mrs Jackson has now moved to her Additional Support for Learning position. The Maths vacancy has not yet been filled and it has been identified that there may be issues doing this as it is a temporary vacancy. Therefore, it is planned that Mrs Buchan will apply to Aberdeenshire Council to convert this into a permanent vacancy in order to hopefully fill it more quickly as this would be in the best interests of the pupils.

#### School Finances

Carry forward has now been confirmed and is looking healthy.

The school intends to invest in ICT - upgrading existing equipment and supplying every teacher with a laptop so that they can be equipped for any future lockdowns.

Movable laptop trollies are being looked at.

Macbooks in the Creative Arts and English faculties will be renewed – using Garage band, I-movie etc.

The remainder of the funds will be available for faculties to bid for materials they need.

The school has identified that there is insufficient seating in school with the requirement for year groups to be separated. They have therefore ordered canteen style foldable tables with fixed seating to allow more pupils to sit at a table to eat.

#### **4. COVID 19**

There have been 2 recent cases in the first year cohort.

Due to the number of pupils and schools in Aberdeenshire dealing with cases, there was a delay in Health Protection Teams identifying potential close contacts. This was the reason for all first years being asked to remain at home.

Most pupils returned to school today.

A further update of the school risk assessment has been uploaded to the school website.

Heating and ventilation has been updated – different areas of the school have different issues with this. The SLT are asking staff to open windows between classes if possible. If pupils feel cold, they should consider wearing more layers to school if possible and should be encouraged to let the teacher know if they are particularly cold.

There are specific concerns in Home Economics and Science classes as the department risk assessments state that jackets should be taken off to prevent fire risks.

The school is looking at developing a consistent approach across the school building, however it is important to understand that teachers are facing different conditions in each area of the school and

the best advice would be for pupils to arrive in school with appropriate clothing – layers are recommended as this allows pupils to alter their clothing dependant on the class they are in.

Questions from Parents;

Are Lockdowns likely in the New Year?

- We haven't been given any indication of this but it is best to be on the front foot and prepared so that is what we have been doing.
- We have spoken to our staff to make them aware that there is no expectation for them to work longer hours if there is a lockdown – many of our staff do work additional hours.
- All of our staff have access to the school systems so that will not be a problem if a lockdown happens.

Do all pupils have devices now?

- All pupils should have devices so everyone would be able to engage with online learning.
- Mrs T Booth will check if the second tranche of Scottish Government devices have arrived – they should definitely arrive before the end of term.
- Mrs Booth confirmed that the second order was submitted but not yet received.
- The first tranche ensured that all pupils targeted because they have free school meals, PEF or are vulnerable have access to a device.
- The second tranche were targeting those with specific learning difficulties to ensure that they have access to suitable devices. These can be kept in school to help them in class or can be taken home – dependent on the needs of the individual child.

Is the new seating suitable for pupils with physical disabilities?

- It will depend on the disability, but the needs of all pupils will be met by suitable facilities.
- The new seating should assist with organisation of the various social / eating areas as Mrs Booth and Mrs Buchan currently spend 15 minutes putting chairs back at the end of break and lunch each day.

Parents fed back that some first year work on glow is not being checked and there is not feedback being provided to individual children (this linked with pupils being absent due to recent cases of COVID19).

- Mrs Buchan explained that there is a limited amount of time available for teachers to spend providing feedback.
- This means that teachers are not always able to provide feedback immediately.
- Staff were pleased with engagement online from first years

Is there any update on Google Meet?

- If we go into Lockdown again and have pupils and staff at home on laptops, it will be used.
- However, as the school desktops do not have cameras, it is not straightforward to be used in classrooms for pupils who are not in due to self-isolating to be able to join into classes.
- We have had a small number of pupils trying it out.
- The school has major capacity and resource issues as we do not have spare teachers to be producing material for small numbers of pupils while the majority are in school.

Are there any plans for the school to use E-sgoil?

- Individual pupils can use this
- Small numbers are able to obtain access.
- It may be that the school use this for cohorts who are self-isolating at home.
- The school has not looked into this yet.

- E-sgoil would be used to help and support staff regarding capacity – probably most useful for our younger age groups.

Is Scholar useful?

-if we go into lockdown again, we may look at putting cohorts of pupils into remote learning

Ms Booth talked about the increased workload for the staff – particularly with regards to senior pupils and the SQA assessments. Staff are keen to move things forward with the recording of lessons.

Some faculties have put in bids for budget to purchase visualisers for use in class for use when discussing pieces of work.

There is a record facility where classes can be uploaded to Google Classroom.

The school is continuing to look into more technology and how it can be used to support pupils.

Are there any changes for pupils with the area going into Tier Three?

- The area goes into tier three on Friday evening so there is no change this term.
- However, if we continue in tier three next term, all s4,5 and 6 and their teachers will need to wear face coverings in the classrooms.

## **5. Prelims – now to be replaced by Assessment Blocks**

- The school believes that it is the right decision to go ahead with the Assessment Block in January.
- It will provide feedback for pupils
- It also allows the school to keep the pupils in classes and learning.
- We would prefer to have our senior pupils in school at this time at this point in the year due to the disruptions we have already faced.
- There are still many unanswered questions regarding the SQA assessments
- The school is concerned that there may be more COVID19 related issues which may disrupt term 3.
- Workload for staff is increasing and there are a lot of staff concerns regarding safety.
- We knew about the Nat 5s but adding the Highers and Advanced Highers into the assessment process is another concern.
- There are many layers of moderation and quality assurance and this takes up staff time.
- Other schools have similar plans for assessments, and many of those who were planning formal prelims are now converting to more informal assessment blocks.
- We are not prepared to put our pupils into large exam hall spaces at this time given the advice has been that it is not possible for the exams to go ahead safely.
- The staff are comfortable with this plan
- The school is trying to limit pupil workload but at the same time they must provide evidence.

Will assessments be the only evidence used?

- No

A parent explained the impact that the constant changes and continued uncertainty was having on some of the senior pupils. Shifts are required mentally to deal with the cancelled exams, the assessment blocks are new; some are now panicking thinking that these assessment blocks are the new exams. Pupils and parents have concerns about the need to fully engage during the day when assessments are later in the day. There is a degree of mental dexterity required to go from class to assessment and back again and these pupils have been under constant pressure for months now.

- Mrs Buchan responded that she could understand the points being made.

- This situation is difficult for everyone, but the plan is in place and it would be difficult to alter this at this stage.
- Reassurance was offered that 2-4 pieces of work be required by the SQA and this may include class tests and it would be the best work of pupils.
- The school plans to do further assessments going forwards and is looking to hold a further assessment block later in the year.
- A provisional date has now been provided by the SQA and there is talk of a final date for Aberdeenshire schools too. When this is all confirmed, the school can work back to provide pupils and staff with deadlines for providing suitable pieces of work.
- The school understands that many pupils make significant progress between January and the end of March / April.
- The SQA are not recommending an internal exam diet – we have no idea what the country will be looking like by May.
- The school intends to build in some study leave in March / April.
- We may have an Aberdeenshire –wide approach by then.
- Current local authority guidance is that pupils should be in school as this is the safest place for them.
- The local authority does not want pupils in the wider community for health and safety reasons.

A parent made the point that giving the pupils the message that everything counts is similar to asking an athlete to perform at their peak constantly. Pupils now believe that if they have an off day on a test it will count towards their end result. Some pupils are now dealing with very high anxiety levels..

- Mrs Buchan undertook to provide pupils with a comprehensive guidance message to reassure them.
- This assessment block is new to everyone
- The SQA have only recently provided a date for submission of data / results.
- Some subject teachers are still waiting to hear the most up to date guidance on their subjects. They need this information to allow them to plan.
- Principal teachers had created a summary of all the key pieces of work required to be handed in by each child and a timescale for these. This will now need to be reviewed given the recent information about Highers and Advanced Highers being cancelled.
- Guidance teachers are also reviewing their plans for this year as subject choices etc will still need to be completed at the same times –now using the January Assessments to assist rather than prelims.
- Generally, the school plans are in a state of flux due to the ongoing changes.
- The message to pupils and teachers is that we need to prepare for continuing changes. On a positive note, the teachers have been gathering evidence from day one following their experience last year and so each Faculty already has a considerable amount of evidence regarding pupil performance.
- The school is seeking clarification from the local authority and the SQA on what happens next.
- Given that we have now moved into Tier 3, there is a chance we could be in lockdown in January or February due to the Christmas relaxation of rules.
- There have been administration challenges due to changes of roles in the office. Different tasks have now been allocated and staff are becoming more familiar with their new roles.
- We have also had challenges due to staff being ill and some who have been working from home for a variety of reasons.

A parent pointed out that there was no Higher History in the January Assessments.

- Not every subject required a timeslot as some have already completed in class assessments due to the schedule of teaching which was already planned. History is one of these subjects.
- Teachers are aware of when it is best to assess individual pupils and the school encourages teachers to use their professional judgement in this regard.

## 6. Mental Health

What support has been put in place by Aberdeenshire Council to help the school with the mental health of pupils given that our PSW is moving to his new position in Mintlaw?

- No additional support has been allocated.
- It is expected that his position as Pupil Support worker will be advertised.
- No school counsellor has been allocated as Aberdeenshire Council could not secure sufficient qualified and suitable applicants to cover all the schools.
- The SLT will do a learner walk to target fifth years to reassure them regarding the January Assessments not being the be all and end all of assessments this year.
- The school will be focussing on providing opportunities to pupils to showcase their talents and skills in their academic subjects over the next few weeks.
- There will be a wider communication across all years too; focussing on the message that it is not a bad thing to have a bad year.
- Fourth, fifth and sixth years will be provided with reassurances that the school will support them through this difficult time.

## 7. Assessment Blocks

What happens if pupils are self-isolating during the assessment blocks?

- Pupils will be allowed to complete the assessments at a later date.

Ms Booth stated that there will not be an exceptional circumstances service this year as this is used when a school applies to substitute evidence it has with that submitted during the exam.

The SQA have however said that there will be an alternative service for pupils whose learning has been disrupted (for example by multiple self-isolations).

## 8. Google Meet

Already discussed above – the school is ready should there be a lockdown but there are more challenges around using it for when only part of a class is self isolating.

Parents raised a concern that some teachers are not using completion dates and this means that work does not appear on work lists for pupils and it makes it harder for pupils to manage their work load – particularly for younger pupils who have many subjects.

Mrs Buchan confirmed that this would be communicated to teachers.

## 9. Google Guardian

- Mrs L Moir who has been appointed PT Digital Learning is currently doing this role one day a week as she is continuing to teach in the Technical department for three days a week.
- The school has successfully recruited a part time Technical teacher to take on her teaching hours in January and she will then move to 0.8 FTE PT Digital Learning.
- Letters will be circulated to parents after the holidays for parents to sign up to this service and to explain what it is.

## 10. PE / School Uniform

- Mrs Buchan confirmed that school uniform is required on days pupils do not have PE. Parents are encouraged to consider providing multiple layers as it is expected that some classrooms may feel chilly at times due to the requirement in the school risk assessment (informed by

Scottish Government advice and Aberdeenshire Council guidance) for ventilation to be used as a control measure against Covid19.

- Pupils should wear PE clothes on days when they have PE. During winter when colder weather is to be expected, please encourage your child to wear suitably warm PE clothes.

#### 11. Communication

- A letter sent by Ms Booth through Groupcall was not received by parents
- The school was aware that some parents had not received it but when all parents attending the meeting disclosed they had not received the letter, it was identified that this may have been a wider issue. The letter was explaining the recent senior reports which had been sent home in schoolbags. The letter will be re-sent.
- Parent Portal will be used going forward and this should mean that the service is more reliable.
- Parents are reminded to sign up for this if they have not already done so.
- Mrs Buchan was thanked by parents for including the menu for the canteen on the daily bulletin. This helps both pupils and families to prepare for the week.
- Parents fed back that the pupils had reported enjoying (sometimes multiple) school Christmas lunches.

A parent asked if there was an issue with behaviour amongst some groups of pupils in school.

- Mrs Buchan confirmed that there have been some challenges amongst fourth and fifth year boys; particularly around behaviour at lunchtime. There has been input with parents and consequences for those involved.
- However, the vast majority of pupils are behaving well in these difficult times.

#### 12. AOCB

The school staff and senior leadership team were thanked for their ongoing hard work in challenging and ever changing circumstances.

#### Appendix 1

The following questions were collated and submitted to the school in advance of the meeting. They were not discussed at the meeting because the majority of attendees had not seen them.

Is there going to be study leave available for S4 students, prior to Prelims, it appears some teachers are giving this in class, some are not, as apparently there won't be official any study leave. Parents have expressed a concern as the level of testing that is been done for the Prelim, is that same that would have been done normally, but with no study leave this year, putting additional pressure on pupils, when the Prelims are probably more important than ever, as there will be no SQA exams.

We are not having Prelims 'per se', it is an Assessment Block in school during class time. No Study Leave planned to allow for maximum teaching time. It has been left to the discretion of teachers how to use the time in the run up to their timetabled Class Assessment. Some may do revision with their classes whilst others may carry on teaching the curriculum. Teachers have been advised it would not be good practice to allow pupils to study for other subjects in their class time. N5/H/ADH assessments are restricted to a double period within the January Assessment Block, which spans 2 and a half weeks. There should be no other assessments within this period. This is substantially less time than would have been in the case in a traditional Prelim Diet, often with 2 papers for each subject lasting in excess of 2.5 hours. Now the SQA has published Subject Specific Guidelines on N5 Assessment, faculties are currently planning their assessment calendars for the gathering of key pieces of evidence, which will take place over the course of the session. These dates may be subject to change as the Estimates

deadline has not been released by the SQA yet. We are planning to share the January Assessment Block timetable shortly with parents/carers.

After the prelims, the curriculum will continue to be taught but with no further assessment on this, is that correct ?

No, this is not the case. We will share further assessment details once these are finalised following release of the SQA Estimates and other key SQA dates.

One parent has asked that if there are to be no SQA exams this year, can the Prelims not be pushed back a bit?

We are not running Prelims per se. We have timetabled Class Assessments in January. Once reviewed, and following the release of key SQA deadlines, we may look to support a further timetabled Assessment Block later in the session to support faculties in the gathering evidence nearer to the end of courses.

I also understand that normally after the SQA Nat 5 exams had been sat, pupils would then move onto the Higher Curriculum before the actual summer break, is this going to be happening again, do you know.

School timetables usually change prior to the summer break. Pupils usually have about 6 weeks studying their new courses before summer. As there will be no SQA N5 exams, the school will need to consider carefully when the change of timetable occurs this session. No decision has been made at this point.

I get the feeling that the general concern of pupils who have spoken to their parents, is that there is a lot of pressure on the Prelims now, this year, with less study/prep opportunities as previous years and some pupils are saying that even though they will still be taught aspects of the curriculum after the prelims, this will not be tested or formally assessed for overall gradings.

We have introduced Assessment Blocks to try to manage pupil workload (and associated pressure/stress/anxiety) with timetabling Class Assessments. As usual, teachers will build in revision to revisit topics/skills in lessons to prepare pupils well for their assessments. Lunchtime study classes and drop-in sessions are offered by many teachers/subjects. There are also online resources available to support pupils to prepare for their assessments.