

**Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School (CMES) &
Montessori Center of Minnesota (MCM)
Joint Board of Directors Meeting – Tuesday, October 28, 2014 - 6:00 pm**

CMES Attendees: Melissa Santrach, Chris Bewell, Kristen Campbell, Eve Lo, Juliann McDermott, Jane Reilly, Julie Richards, Sandy Schmidt, Liesl Taylor

MCM Attendees: Teresa Sterns, Tammy Tesky Ausen, Sarah Boughton, Gillett Cole, Liza Davis, Rory Duggan, Nancy Larson Haskin, Margaret Lovejoy, Stuart Mason, Ann McKinnon, Michael Monahan, Peter Pearson, Molly O'Shaughnessy, Carleen Rhodes, John Walski

CMES Absent: Elizabeth Coenen, Andrea Galdames, Marjorie Nitz

AGENDA

Meeting called to order at 6:49 pm by CMES and MCM Board Chairs

Call to order was preceded by a brief social/dinner provided by the Montessori Center of Minnesota.

Introductions

- Attendees introduced themselves and described their affiliation with CMES or MCM as well as their connection to Montessori education.

MCM Year in Review –Teresa Sterns, MCM Board Chair

- Teresa noted that the Montessori Training Center continues to grow and mentioned several indicators of MCM's growth and success:
 - Last year the budget was \$1.6 million; this year it is \$1.9 million.
 - 3 new staff positions were added: Special Programs Coordinator, Parent Education Coordinator, and Licensed Social Worker. Molly commented that in 2007 there was a staff of 4 and now there is a staff of 40.
 - 140 students have attended workshops.
 - The Board has grown from 10 members in 2013 – 14 to 15 members in 2014 – 15.
 - The partnership program continues to get closer to its goal of establishing 10 partnerships in 5 year years – there are 7 in place to date.
 - A very important partnership with St. Kate's has been established.
 - The Better Way Foundation has given a significant grant so that MCM can provide social services within the educational environment. This allows MCM to serve a broader range of families' needs.
 - The O'Shaughnessy Foundation has provided support toward MCM's strategic marketing efforts, which has resulted in the Board establishing a Marketing Committee.
 - The final classroom, which has been named "Forest," is complete and has been transformative to the CMES school campus and to the lives of the children.
- Teresa shared what the MCM Board will be focusing on in the coming year:
 - Good governance through effective strategic planning, engaged Board committees, and administrative excellence.
 - Increased market awareness.
 - Growing the annual fund.
 - Preparing (in the long-term) for a transition in leadership.
- Molly offered comments about the donor event that occurred earlier in October and encouraged Board members who hadn't yet seen the donor wall to take a look this evening.

CMES Year in Review presented jointly by Melissa Santrach, CMES Board Chair and Liesl Taylor, CMES Head of School

Melissa reviewed the CMES mission and then she and Liesl described the ways in which CMES is fulfilling its mission. *“Cornerstone Montessori Elementary School’s mission is to support children from culturally and economically diverse backgrounds living in or near St. Paul’s East Side through a rigorous and high-impact Montessori program that empowers them to make positive decisions, develop self-discipline, and create a true sense of responsibility for themselves and others in their community.”*

- Seventy-six percent of CMES students are from St. Paul and the school’s population is very diverse – racially, ethnically, and economically. CMES also has a high Special Education population and a high free and reduced lunch population.
- Enrollment growth is on target and next year we are expecting to be fully enrolled with 144 students.
 - A challenge in this area is that St. Paul schools recently changed their enrollment model so they now begin middle school in 6th grade. Our hope is to retain students through the 6th grade so they have the full 3-year Upper Elementary experience. Liesl is working to address this.
- The last classroom has been added and has a new staff member. Dan came to CMES from JJ Hill Montessori. He has 25 years of classroom experience and brings a wonderful combination of wisdom and experience. He is reveling in our AMI atmosphere.
 - CMES has also welcomed many new staff members and has increased the diversity among staff. Liesl commented that the staff are very passionate and committed and to support their growth together she is ensuring they have the training and professional development opportunities to succeed at CMES.
 - The staffing areas that are still growing are Special Education and Literacy. We do have a literacy specialist and it’s making a big difference already but more needs to be done.
- CMES is at a point where we see parents are developing a fuller understanding of what a Montessori environment provides, and they are becoming more active in supporting school events; we also have a very active Board and are building a strong sense of community.
- Work has been underway nationwide in the Montessori community during the last 18 months to link the Common Core to AMI presentations.
 - This will greatly help in replicating the CMES model.
 - The work was very well done. It purposefully linked AMI presentations to standards and cautioned educators not to be swayed by fads of education but to stay true to Montessori pedagogy, which has one hundred years of success.
- The CMES annual audit is underway and we are showing a good fund balance for new school with a \$1.4 million budget.
 - Now that the CMES start-up grants have been expended (Walton was \$250,000 and CSP was \$600,000), we rely primarily on state per-pupil funding so our budget is tight and must be managed carefully.
 - The budget is particularly tight this year because we have all the classrooms occupied and staffed, but haven’t yet reached full enrollment – that will happen next year. Fortunately we have a great team managing the budget and we have recently established a Development Committee. Staff and Board members working on the budget are conservative in financial areas and excellent stewards of our financial resources.

- Regarding measures of academic progress, we are still seeing a discrepancy between what the children demonstrate in the classroom and what the standardized test results show.
 - As a public school we are required to do MCA testing (both reading and math testing begins with children who are in 3rd grade). Although the scores aren't where we want them to be, they have increased dramatically from last year to this year. One reason is that the children who took the MCAs this year have been with Cornerstone the longest.
 - We are not troubled by this overall but we do know we need to help the children be successful in standardized tests. We are a public school and want to be accountable.
 - We also do NWEA testing, which is used in-house as a tool to help teachers know where children are academically. It helps teachers better understand and address each child's academic strengths and weaknesses.
- We are also working with a number of children who have significant behavior issues. Much work is being done with both the staff and children to address this and to be sure we have the right policies in place to support our environment.
- Other areas of growth include the following:
 - Communication between staff and families has increased with weekly folders going home.
 - The Going Out program has been established and students are very excited to plan and go on their adventures!
 - Community engagement continues to spread with CMES using Experience Corps volunteers to support literacy efforts and with the partnership CMES has with Spectrum High School students who provided warm hats for the children and hosted a Field Day!
 - Our school leadership is very strong, with Liesl completing her first year as Head of School. She is supported by Chris who wears many hats and does so many things so very well.
 - We now have a fully elected 9-member Board with 3 members up for election annually.
 - Our Board received the 2014 Governance Award from our authorizer VOA and a 2014 MDE Finance Award. We also were given a 5-year Charter Contract Renewal with VOA. They usually give 2- or 3-year contracts.
 - Liesl was invited to present at a NAMTA Conference. Her talk focused on grace and courtesy in the elementary classroom.
- Liesl and Melissa offered their sincere thanks to the MCM Board for the beautiful space they have provided and their generous investment in CMES. Liesl invited the MCM Board to visit and see how their investment is supporting the children and families of Cornerstone.

Comments, Questions, and Discussion

- CMES was asked if the financial support from the state is a break-even model.
 - Melissa noted that it is essentially break-even and that our finances are tight because we aren't yet fully enrolled. We would like to raise additional funds to provide more support in some areas such as literacy and perhaps after-school activities. We are also striving for a fund balance of 20%. Melissa also commented that we realize that to be successful in attracting donors, we need to have a track record of success.
- With regard to CMES test scores, how do they compare to other schools overall?
 - Liesl commented that the topic of test scores is a complex one. She noted that we have developed goals with VOA for the next 5 years that are based on what nearby schools are achieving.

- Some of the variables that affect the scores are the number of years a student has been at CMES before reaching 3rd grade and how many CMES students are taking the tests. For example, we had 13 children taking the test last year and that includes the special education students and ELL students. So one or two students having an “off” day can impact the percentages in a significant way.
- Liesl said CMES staff is working with students to help them better understand the testing language in the context of the Montessori work.
- Liesl acknowledged that CMES has a way to go but is interested to see what happens this year with 3rd and 5th year students who have been with CMES the longest.
- Molly noted that in looking at the scores in the context of the school being a new charter with many children who have no Montessori background, the scores are good.
- Melissa noted that when we talk about our students’ success and growth we always want to present the full range of experiences and successes of our students, not just the standardized test scores.
- With regard to the problem of losing 6th graders because St. Paul begins middle school at 6th grade rather than 7th, a suggestion was made that CMES develop a connection with another school who would welcome the children as 7th graders.
 - Liesl responded that she has already talked with Avalon and will be connecting with Great River Montessori to discuss this. Other schools were suggested as potential partners as well.

Motion to Adjourn

MIKE MONAHAN MADE A MOTION TO ADJOURN THE MEETING AT 7:42 PM; RORY DUGGAN SECONDED THE MOTION. MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

Respectfully submitted by Jane Reilly, CMES Board Secretary