Newton South School Council Meeting

February 27, 2018

In attendance: May Chiu, Bella Ertel, Michelle Luo, Clare Landrigan, Kathleen Sabet, Marcia Okun, Hema Roychowdhury, Risa Shames, Deb Youngblood, Martha Hausman, Amelia Pennell, Rebecca Levy, Principal Joel Stembridge

The regular meeting agenda was suspended and instead a discussion regarding school safety in the aftermath of the Parkland, Fl school shooting was the focus.

Principal Stembridge read aloud the letter to the South community that he scheduled to email to the whole school community that same evening. The letter focused on prevention efforts on helping young people be known and feel connected within the school community and recommended not reacting by trying to harden our school with things like locked doors, armed guards, metal detectors. He noted that the wider school safety team will be meeting to discuss potential security changes and that he would share any decisions that were made.

Principal Stembridge acknowledged that there is currently a debate about the appropriateness of the “open campus” model at South. He stated that teachers and students are primarily in favor of open campus and he will not be leading any changes to that school approach which is also rooted in the architectural design of school as well as the educational philosophy.

He also stated that most violence in schools takes place by someone who knows the school and is known and therefore deterrents such as locked doors, metal detectors are ineffective against them, citing several examples of violence perpetuated in spite of these protocols.

There was a discussion regarding the possibility of locking some additional doors which is being considered.

Teachers discussed the challenge of responding to student’s worries and need to process. And acknowledged the challenge of being prepared to respond to these needs in the immediate aftermath of an incident such as this one.

Students requested additional resources to help them have the facts about gun violence and prevention.

Students and teachers both talked about strategies for empowering students to have a voice and there was some discussion of the planned walk out on March 14. Principal Stembridge emphasized that he wants these efforts to be student led and encouraged students to come to him with a concrete plan. There was discussion about the value of student activism at this time and possibility of real, productive change coming out of it.

There was discussion about the concept of school connectedness and the dilemma of these efforts being focused on helping young people have a connection with an adult. However, supporting positive peer to peer relationships was reported to be more difficult and the result can be students still experience degrading and difficult social interactions with peers.

A student asked about whether adults in the building have mechanisms in place for responding to someone who raises a concern about another student. It was answered with a yes.

There was a discussion about the best way to reinforce to students their role in reporting these concerns in a manner that doesn’t feel like tattling or threatening to the reporter. The mantra of “Never Worry Alone” was recommended as a way to get this message out to students, so that if there anything they learn about or witness that causes them to worry, they are strongly encouraged to share that worry with a trusted adult who will follow up on it.

A resource of MA Alliance to prevent gun violence was suggested both to students and adults as a way to get more information and to perhaps help students organize their efforts.

There was discussion about the fear that everyone in the building is now feeling and the dilemma of how to address it productively and safely, without overburdening those who want to move on from this conversation. One student described the palpable and visible fear in the students who were in the building two days after the shooting in FL when the fire alarm at South went off. She said you could see on kids faces that they thought a shooting was happening at South. Finding ways to help kids feel safe coming to school as well as teachers and parents is the key question on everyone’s mind.

The council agreed to return to the regular agenda at the next meeting.