SHCA Education Committee Meeting with Philadelphia School District Representative Karyn Lynch

Dear Neighbors,

On Friday, February 7, 2014, the SHCA Education Committee met with Philadelphia School District Representative Karyn Lynch, who is a member of Superintendent Hite’s Executive Team.   The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the Penn Alexander School kindergarten lottery and wait list, to encourage increased transparency about district based policies and enrollment statistics, and to encourage an overall more proactive partnership between the community and the School District with respect to both short term and long term Penn Alexander enrollment policies.   Because this is a matter of great importance and interest to our community, we wanted to share a summary of the discussion.

**Wait list and current enrollment**.

Policies relating to both the wait list and the kindergarten admissions lottery are set by the District, not the School.  Per Ms. Lynch, effectively there are currently two wait lists for PAS – an “historical” list and a “new” list.  Until recently, the wait list rolled over year-to-year, so children on the wait list did not have to re-register every year. Children on the historical wait list are those who registered and were placed on the wait list prior to the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year. They have been verified to be in-catchment and have chosen to remain on the wait list, and they will be grandfathered under the old policy and continue to remain on the wait list after this year until they are admitted.  Children who are new to the wait list are those who have registered since the beginning of this school year.  This “new” wait list will not roll-over and children who have not already been admitted will need to be re-registered next school year.  Per Ms. Lynch, there are currently 10 children on the historical wait list and an additional 43 children on the new wait list.   Residency has not yet been verified for all of the children on the new wait list, but will be before any of those children are admitted.

Ms. Lynch provided, by grade, the numbers of children currently enrolled and on both wait lists, and these numbers are identified in the chart below.   It was clarified by Ms. Lynch that although the district mandates school district policy regarding the wait list, the progression of the wait list is managed by PAS administration.   Ms. Lynch stated that parents with questions about their child’s status on the wait list should therefore contact PAS directly.   She also clarified that capacity, including potential movement from the wait list, is typically evaluated at the end of the report card period, not immediately after a spot becomes available.  (The current period ends this Friday.)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Grade** | **Current Cap\*** | **Current Enrollment (by class room / by grade)** | **Historical, grandfathered wait list**  | **”New” Wait List**  |
| K |     72 or 78\*\* | 18/18/19/16 = 71 |   | 10 |
| 1 | 72 | 24/24/23 =71 | 2 | 3 |
| 2 | 72 | 22/24/21 = 67 | 2 | 7 |
| 3 | 72 | 22/23/23 = 68 |   | 6 |
| 4 | 72 | 24/23/21 = 68 |   | 6 |
| 5 |       72\*\*\* | 20/19/21 = 60 | 6 | 5 |
| 6 | 48 | 24/22 = 46 |   | 1 |
| 7 | 48 | 24/24 = 48 |   | 4 |
| 8 | 48 | 23/23 = 46 |   | 1 |
| Total  | **576** | **545** | **10** | **43** |

\* “Current Cap” is based on the contract with Penn, the SDP, and the PFT which provided for no more than 18 in a K class and no more than 24 in a 1-8 class, multiplied by the current number of classrooms in the school for that grade.

\*\* The kindergarten cap was increased from 72 to 78 for the 2013-14 lottery, but is returning to 72 for this year’s lottery.  Because this was not clarified until after the meeting, it is not currently clear to us what the correct cap number is for backfilling empty kindergarten spots with children on the wait list this year.

\*\*\*We understand that, in practice, 5th grade capacity may be lower than the contractual cap in anticipation of there being 2 classrooms in 6th grade, instead of 3.

The Committee urged Ms. Lynch to reconsider the change in the wait list policy.   We conveyed that because we are the inaugural neighborhood school with a lottery (which was previously described as a “pilot” lottery), we questioned whether our wait list policy should have to conform to those of other schools with wait lists, which are typically either charter or magnet schools.  For example, in a magnet school where admission is based on merit, it may make sense to reset the wait list each year so the most meritorious students can attend; however, in a neighborhood school, where admission is based on residency, we requested that consideration be given to returning to the system of rolling over the wait list each year so those with roots in the community don’t get permanently separated from siblings and neighbors.  Ms. Lynch took our concerns under advisement.

**Enrollment** **Capacity**

Ms. Lynch stated that there has been no further consideration of expanding enrollment capacity, noting that any plan to expand enrollment would require money and resources.   We noted, however, that there currently appears to be a relatively small discrepancy between current vacancies and the wait list.   We also requested historical enrollment and admissions data over a 5-year period, so we can understand the trends and better assess whether there is a feasible long-term solution to the enrollment issues.   For a number of reasons, Ms. Lynch did not think that the historical data was available and/or reliable.   Ms. Lynch definitively ruled out changing the borders of the catchment zone at this time.

**Kindergarten Enrollment 2014-2015**

Ms. Lynch stated that kindergarten enrollment will occur this year via lottery, as outlined in the SDP document <http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/uploads/hk/ty/hkty_N2eVxtdGps9UvvomA/PAS_K_reg2014.pdf>.  Although for last year’s lottery, the District expanded the enrollment cap to 78, this year, the cap is returning to 72 in compliance with the contract.  In this year’s lottery, Ms. Lynch stated that all in-catchment children, including those in the Head Start and Early Intervention programs, will enter the lottery.   She confirmed that if fewer than 72 children register, the lottery will be canceled and everyone will be enrolled.   We requested that in the future, rather than announcing a lottery, the SDP just announce a registration period with a lottery only to follow if the number of registrants exceeds the enrollment cap.  She also took this suggestion under advisement.

**Future Collaboration with the Community**

We sought advice on the best mechanism for a long-term collaborative process through which the community can partner with the District and the School and other stakeholders to continue to address these issues.  Ms. Lynch recommended that collaboration begin with Principal Sydnor and the PAS administration.  Community members can also bring these issues to the attention of the recently formed School Advisory Council (SAC), which advises the principal on school policy (but lacks decision-making authority).  Monica Calkins (SHCA President) is the community representative on the SAC, and can be contacted at mcalkins@upenn.edu.  There is also a SAC suggestion box outside the school office.

We greatly appreciate that Ms. Lynch took the time to meet with us and to thoughtfully listen to our concerns and provide candid information and feedback.

Best regards,
Eric Santoro
Chair, SHCA Education Committee