

## DISCUSSION PAPER

### SOUTH ISLAND SCHOOL STUDENT LED CONSULTATIONS – LOOKING FOR A BETTER WAY

*There is an old English idiom that says, “you can’t fit a quart into a pint pot” (a quart is two pints of liquid). I don’t know if there is a Chinese equivalent of this but the meaning of the saying is that some things are just too big to fit into the available space.*

Over many years of working with Parents’ consultation evenings, I have never worked in a school that has got this ‘right’. What would ‘right’ mean? I think it would mean that every parent and every teacher was satisfied and that the process was meaningful, fair and manageable.

Having just finished our Year 7 Student Led Consultation (SLC), it seems like a good time to pause and reflect on whether we can find a better way to make this the ‘right’ experience for SIS parents and staff. I feel that parents, especially those new to us from Primary School, must look at the system and think ‘why can’t they do this better?’ The veteran parents in the older years gradually get used to it and as the group sizes shrink and the number of subjects reduce, the experience for parents of Years 10-13 students becomes gradually more useful and less stressful.

In this paper my main focus is the experience for Year 7 and 8 parents, where the numbers are greatest and the dissatisfaction in terms of feedback is probably the highest. The type of comments we have received (as well as a great deal of very positive feedback) focus around

- the inability for parents to book to meet all of their children’s teachers;
- the lack of time there is to talk;
- the fact that appointments do not keep to time, causing queues to build up.
- some (but not all) parents do not like the ‘student led’ part of the process, really wanting feedback from teachers as the main purpose of their visit.

Once a year we close the school for Academic Monitoring Day (AMD). Here, parents meet Tutors for a 15-minute interview. From feedback, these meetings are well received and enjoyed by teachers and parents.

### The Problem

To understand the problem, I’d like to look at some of the logistics and consider some of the questions often asked by frustrated parents.

#### SOME FACTS

- During a three hour ‘shift’ on a parents’ evening, a teacher can see a realistic maximum of 30 parents - 10 per hour. So with one class and no tutor group, it IS *possible* for a teacher to see every parent
- If any teacher has more than one class in the same year group (and many do), this means that they cannot see all of their students’ parents in one evening

- If a teacher has both a class *and* a tutor group in the same Year Group, this also means that they cannot see all of their students and tutees on one evening
- Some teachers teach more students than others (depending on the amount of time given to the subject on the curriculum). Drama teachers, for example, might easily teach more than 300 students. In this case, to allow a parent meeting with each parent across all years would involve 30 hours of meetings! (And, of course, writing 300 reports is also quite a challenge...)

#### SOME FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **Why don't they just do two evenings?**
  - Many teachers teach in at least 6 of the 7 year groups in the school. Two evenings per year group would mean 12, maybe 14 nights in school, each year. That also doubles the student prefect duty roster. Furthermore, it wouldn't necessarily solve the problem. Any tutor who also had *two* classes in one year group (again, not uncommon) STILL couldn't see all the parents, even if they did 30 meetings a night for two nights. Frankly, the physical challenge of conducting 60 interviews in this way and still being fit to teach would be prohibitive – our teachers have homes and families to look after as well.
  - An even greater problem is HOW we would divide the evening into two halves. Children all have different combinations of teachers so ALL the teachers would have to be in for BOTH nights...meaning that those who were *only* tutors would have to spend 6 hours in school to conduct about 90 minutes' worth of interviews.
  - This would also mean that parents would have to come in for two nights, instead of one.
- **Why can't we have longer appointments?**
  - This is fairly obvious – a longer meeting means even fewer appointments than we can manage now – the problem simply gets worse.
- **Why don't we do it all on Academic Monitoring Day instead of just meeting tutors on that day?**
  - This sounds good but in an 8-hour day, a teacher working without a break could see just 80 students (in reality, a task almost impossible to contemplate). The vast majority of teachers teach more students than this, not including their tutor groups. *What about closing the school for 2 days?* We still couldn't fit it all in for the many teachers who teach 200 plus students (and no one could manage 160 meetings in two days!).
  - Additionally, to focus on *one day* would also mean that ALL school reports had to be written at the same time. For many teachers, they would do nothing else for weeks except write and check reports. Physically, it isn't possible.

**So the simple truth is that by offering parents a chance to meet their children's teachers, we offer something that simply cannot be delivered in Years 7, 8 and probably 9.**

**What is the way forward?**

There are probably just two broad options:

1. Keep with what we do – it works for most people and gets better as children rise through the school OR
2. Do something significantly different, at least in the junior years.

As a parent, we would like to hear from you, to tell us which of those two options looks like the better choice. This isn't a 'loaded' question, maybe we really should just accept the fact that a quart doesn't fit into a pint pot and be pleased that at least we get a pint in!!

**However, if your preference is Option 2, we would like your help to think about a better solution.**

Any options would probably need to be supported by a reporting system that gives more/better feedback on 'next steps' and progress relative to an expected 'norm'.

**What sort of options are there?**

This is hard to anticipate before we start the conversation but the sorts of areas we might be looking at could be:

- More extensive use of the tutor meeting/relationship – maybe Year 7 and 8 parents meet ONLY with the tutor
- Appointment-style meetings where school contacts parents for meetings if there is an issue but not otherwise
- Open 'surgery' meetings where a number of subject experts are available to answer questions by appointment or as a 'drop in'
- 'Facilitated' meetings between parents and children with teachers present in the room – for example, three weeks a year could be 'pathbrite portfolio' weeks where children are taught how to share progress with parents within a portfolio structure

Maybe the place to start is with a blank piece of paper and ask the question, "If we started again, what would we want to achieve and how would we do that?" Perhaps 'parents' evenings' are simply the wrong place to start that discussion.

If this paper inspires some thoughts, PLEASE SHARE THEM WITH US at [sis@sis.edu.hk](mailto:sis@sis.edu.hk) and **please let us know if you would be interested in joining a discussion group.**

Thank you for reading – wouldn't it be wonderful if, together, we created something better? We would like to try.

Best wishes

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