

Notes from March 3, 2010 Senior PTO Meeting

The March meeting included two topics. The first, Senioritis, was presented by Nicole Bent BHS Guidance Counselor and Robert Grant BHS Social Studies Teacher. The second topic was Choosing the Right College, presented by Joan Casey.

Dean Lande opened the meeting by stating that progress reports will be turned in by teachers on March 11th. Friday night was the junior semi (formal dance). The ante has been upped. If students are found to be under the influence of any drugs or alcohol, they will not be allowed to attend the senior prom. On March 4th, there was an all-day event at the high school which was to focus on the effect of alcohol and drugs on the teen brain. There was an evening event for parents. It is important for parents to be aware as kids prepare to go to college, where everything is available to them. It is time to start the conversation with our children.

Dean Lande went on to say that the school recognizes senior slump. The administration doesn't want a senior slump. They would like the kids to appreciate their teachers. Dean Lande added that the senior paper is a requirement for graduation.

Melanie Alexander, senior class advisor, came in and told parents about the senior t-shirt. T-shirts are available for \$10 in the deans suite. Only large sizes are available, but with sufficient interest smaller sizes could be ordered.

Susan Ridker also made an appeal for PTO funds. PTO donations are down and teacher grants are in jeopardy. Susan reminded parents that the PTO funds many programs and services which reach parents and students. Among them are: Freshmen Barbecue, the student directory and the After the Prom Party. Only one quarter of BHS parents have currently contributed to the PTO. Your donation in any amount will help tremendously!

Dean Lande went on to introduce Nicole Bent and Robert Grant.

Mr. Grant started by saying the kids are giving us a message of profound ambivalence and that sums up the teachers and parents attitude as well. He continued saying that in defense of the students; they work hard, do well, get good test scores and participate in extra-curricular options. This is done in a big part to provide college options. Soon their options will be done. We can't blame the kids, they have held up their end of the bargain. They are now saying I got into my parents choice, surely I can relax now.

Teachers (and parents) should worry if a senior gets to the point of disengagement. The requirements are what they are and there will be no graduation if they are missed. In second semester, the classroom standards are still there, but things are different. Mr. Grant stated that in defense, we haven't changed our rules. A student can still n out (exceed the number of unexcused absences = no credit). The chemical health rules still apply. A few students will completely disengage and for some college will not happen.

Ms. Bent added, if colleges see transcripts they don't like, after acceptance, there are

several options. A student may be placed on academic probation before first semester begins. A student may be required to write a letter to their college dean explaining the lower grades. Or a student may need to meet with the college dean. Ms. Bent stated that she had never seen a college revoke an admission. Ms. Bent explained that colleges receive first and second quarter grades. Third and fourth quarter grades don't make it to colleges, but the final grades do.

The discussion continued with both Mr. Grant and Ms. Bent participating.

One quarter of bad grades can be hidden in the final grade. An uncharacteristic grade can trigger the need to explain what the student was doing while not getting an A and what the student will do at college.

The students are at a tricky developmental level. They may be clinging to friends from their elementary school. This is normal. It might be the last chance to ask her out. Nonetheless while they are focused on friendships, the senior paper needs to be done. Ms. Bent explained that it is possible to pass the senior paper and not pass English. The converse is also true. A student can pass English and not pass the senior paper. The senior paper is due April 30th. This year the English department has made changes to try and make the requirements and timing of the paper more uniform. If a student falls behind in the paper, English teachers will be in touch with the class dean and the students guidance counselor will also be involved. Some students may find themselves working (with supervision) in study hall to complete the requirements. The senior paper guidelines were mailed to parents and can also be found on the BHS website: <http://bhs.brookline.k12.ma.us/NR/rdonlyres/DED35832-D0A1-48AE-A62A-42EE49753DA9/3221/Seniorpaperguidelines2010.pdf>

The letter from English Department Chair, Mary Burchenal:

<http://bhs.brookline.k12.ma.us/NR/rdonlyres/DED35832-D0A1-48AE-A62A-42EE49753DA9/3222/LettertoSeniorParents1.pdf>

A parent asked if SWS requirements were the same. They probably differ, but the deadline is the same. A parent asked what if a student had a problem with the deadline? Mr. Grant advised speaking to the teacher far ahead of time. Some negotiating could be possible. Mr. Grant said that if a student came to him at the last moment, there would probably not be any changes made.

A parent asked if the students progress is being checked on April 12th, does that leave enough time to actually finish the paper by the 30th? Ms. Bent said it can be done. She also commented that it is rare that a student doesn't graduate because the senior paper has not been completed satisfactorily.

Mr. Grant continued that graduation time makes the BHS staff nervous. Every year there is a tragic accident (with fatalities) somewhere within the Route 128 belt. We need to remind the kids they can still get hurt. He commented that for high school seniors to get hurt is so commonplace that it is barely reported. It is a very frightening time (during

graduation week). There are many parties. Some are at parties where the parents are home but not awake. He suggested talking to kids on their way in and on their way out of your home.

If a student receives a tragic interim progress report, call guidance. The fourth quarter is very short. For seniors in AP (advanced placement) courses, it is really over by May 7th after they take the AP exam(s).

A parent asked since the senior prank is no more, could the seniors make a positive contribution? Can you (BHS staff) engage seniors to do something positive? Another parent commented that this class experience has been spoiled by the bad behavior of the class which preceded them. Mr. Grant commented that unfortunately small groups can spoil it for the larger group. The faculty was very angry after last years senior prank which was followed by a small number of students remaining in the school and vandalizing some classrooms. Mr. Grant commented that although the damage was caused by a few students, many knew about it and nobody told (anyone). He continued that all he was hoping for this year was nothing no prank but no desire on the part of many faculty to work on a positive alternative. Maybe in future years, there would be more enthusiasm for the idea.

For seniors, finals are the last two days of their last week in school (May 28th?). There are 10 weeks until the end of school for seniors (from the date of the meeting). Many teachers will give a final exam, but for AP classes, the AP exam is it.

A parent asked about seniors who are over 18 signing themselves out of classes. What should parents do? You pay the rent set rules. Students still need a legitimate excuse. If your student is responsible sign their form. If there are problems, the school will call parents.

An important note to parents, if your student is taking a gap year, then second semester grades will count for college admissions. If students plan on deferring admission, second semester grades are treated no differently than for September 2010 admission.

The second half of the program featured Joan Casey from Educational Advocates. Susan Ridker introduced Joan. Joan's impressive biography can be found on the Educational Advocates website: <http://www.educationaladvocates.com/about.htm> Susan mentioned that Joan visits colleges, meeting with college personnel and students. Joan's topic was Choosing the Right College.

There are specific attributes to look for when choosing a college. College life has changed tremendously in the years since we were students. There have been huge changes in communication and our world is very changed as well. The United States has seen a decline in the number of people claiming English as their first language. We now live in a global world. A changing world won't require a narrow technical education.

Students should get an education grounded in the liberal arts so that they can be prepared; they need an education for jobs that don't currently exist. We need to think of outsourcing that might occur in other areas as the world is changing. Students will need the skills that allow them to do different jobs. Employers say they want people who can write creatively, creatively think and analyze. Seventy-five percent of employers want employees grounded in the liberal arts.

Joan mentioned that interestingly there are some negative correlations associated with those who choose certain jobs. Engineers have a negative correlation with the ability to write and yet writing is needed in most engineering jobs. If your child is looking at an engineering or business major you want to know how else the college supports them in other areas. Members of these careers need to write and to get better at writing. Writing and giving presentations are part of these careers.

Other interesting correlations include science majors showing a decline in writing ability and fine arts majors showing a decline in critical thinking. So what should you look for?

Many colleges have required first year seminars that are really about writing. These seminars have exciting topic choices. Often the seminars are limited to 12 students, even at large universities. Look for this type of program. Students need to get off on the right foot. Tenured English faculty don't want to teach these seminars so the seminars may be taught by graduate students or part time faculty. It bears looking into. College writing is different than in high school. Some students use writing centers at their schools. Look for the availability of writing centers.

Effective speaking and communications skills are important. Students don't do a lot of public speaking anymore. Does the school have opportunities or requirements that support these skills?

Critical thinking is expected (in the working world). Students need to think about information in a new way. Researching and writing is a good way to improve these skills. Look for a school with a senior capstone project or research projects. We also need to be aware of who our kids are. Just because the schools provide these services and opportunities does not mean that our kids will use them. The students have to want to participate.

Collaboration with others is another important skill that can be enhanced at college. Study groups are a good way to do this. We all learn by talking about we are studying. Presenting a topic to a study group or doing research and presenting that research is one of the best things a student can do.

Undergraduate research experience opportunities are important. Students do not have to be science majors to participate in research at college. Students need to look for these opportunities.

Mastery of a foreign language and the opportunity to obtain it is necessary for the new

global environment.

Emphasize to your student not to let fear of a subject hold them back from trying it. Quantitative literacy is very important and many students won't want to take courses in these areas.

Diversity and the opportunity to build perspectives on other cultures should be a part of the college experience. Diversity on the campus is important because learning is not just limited to the classroom. Students need to be around people with different socio-economic backgrounds, different cultural backgrounds, those from other countries.

One other important area which we overlook is the importance of being good people. There is a great emphasis on grades and so much pressure that we don't always worry about our students moral character. Look for a college that will help instill moral character in your child. Schools with mentoring programs can help students think about high and hard moral problems. Students can think about professions with less money and more service components. Colleges also set an example by their own behaviors. What a college does sends a message to the student and tells about the college campus atmosphere. Ethics courses can have an impact. Joan encouraged parents to talk about moral issues at home.

We want our kids to embrace and learn about new things at college. We want them to find things in the catalogue that they can get excited about.

Dos and Don'ts

Did your kids set criteria when looking at schools and when choosing which to apply to? Check the schools which accept them against these criteria. Have your kid write down the factors (that are important). Some decisions (to accept admission) are emotional decisions. If the place is reasonable and your kid has a positive gut reaction, it can work out fine.

Many families have lost funds for college in the economic downturn. When the acceptances come in, many are now seeing the reality of what college will cost. If you haven't spoken to your child and if money is a factor, talk to them tonight. If they can't go anywhere they have been accepted, they need to know. Kids should understand the payback terms, if they are thinking of taking college loans. Less expensive colleges might be more attractive now.

It is important for parents to celebrate the college choices no matter what they are. There is no rule that they have to go to a prestigious college or that they have to go to college right away. If they don't like their choices they can reapply and take a gap year. Remind students to be gracious to friends who didn't get into the colleges of their choice. Don't get into an arms race for achievement. Be kind to others.

For parents waiting for acceptances, there are some things that cross the line. Reading

the kids' e-mail or opening envelopes is not okay. You can ask your child, but it is important to respect their privacy. In making the decision of which college to accept, parents can advise and guide their child but should let the kids trust their instincts. Let them choose. Don't get caught up in the prestige factor. Respect your child's decision even if the school is less selective, especially if your child has good reasons for the choice. Some students sacrifice a prestigious school for a smaller school that will allow them to know their professors. A red flag to parents: when your self-esteem plummets when your child doesn't get into certain schools or when you are competitive with where your friends children got into. Chill out!

Regarding college revisits: it is important that students do the research. Parents can guide the research. If students aren't interested in doing the research, you need to ask if they are ready to go to college. It is a lot of money to spend if a kid is not engaged.

Try not to take admissions advice from friends; each kid is different. In an aside Joan mentioned that some of the more prestigious schools don't require the writing seminars. On the other hand, the community colleges can be more rigorous (in their writing requirements) because students have to be placed in the correct level writing course. For some students community college is a great choice and inexpensive alternative for the first 2 years. These students go on to transfer to 4 year colleges at all levels.

Joan continued by saying do what is right for your family. Don't rely on your college experience because things have changed. The bottom line is that we want our kids to get a great education and to be successful. Think about the best place for them to thrive as students, socially, and morally.

A question and answer period followed:

What should we look for at an admitted student day? Some schools do these by discipline. Students should have an opportunity to hear speakers in the areas in which they are interested. Ask what the advising is like. Do they have mentoring? Does the school have a commitment to writing? How does the school help students become better critical thinkers? Does the school encourage public service?

Can my kid survive in a large university, if they are not the best self-advocate? We worry about it. Be realistic about who your child is. Can they be happy there? Do some practical common sense thinking about who they are. Kids do make mistakes choosing schools. Joan cited an example of one student who was admitted for January at her first choice school but felt like a loser. She went elsewhere but wasn't happy and ended up transferring to her first choice. Sometimes students don't do the research about who else is on campus and don't realize that it may not be a good choice.

Joan told parents that one out of four students transfer colleges. Looking beyond a gap year, students can also take a year off while in college.

A parent asked about the transfer idea. Most kids won't even know if they are happy

when the transfer applications are due. Most kids won't figure out if they are happy at school until after Thanksgiving, maybe not even until after the first year. They can decide that they hate it and then end up loving it. It is hard to know sometimes the student may just be homesick or not like their roommate.

Joan's advice was not to run and save them right away. Encourage them to stick with it. You need to know your child and treat college a bit like summer camp. Give it time to see if there is an improvement.

Joan also stated that for some students transferring is a strategy do well and then move up. This is especially true if they didn't do well in high school.

What should we do if our child likes a school but it is not a great school? Some students want to be challenged and some don't. Kids are more independent at school and spend less time in class. It is hard to know what percentage of kids are happy and what percentage are not. Define happiness. How many don't want to leave the college? Most are happy and some who are not don't leave. You can look at the percentage of students returning for sophomore year, but you need to be a little careful because in some cases students withdraw for financial reasons.

What are sources for evaluating schools for students with an IEP? There is the K&W Guide for Students with Learning Disabilities and ADHD. All schools must give accommodations to students if they are to receive federal funds. Some schools do more; some schools (like Curry College) specialize in these students. Some schools provide more support for all students. Petersons has Petersons Colleges for Students with Learning Disabilities. However not every college that has programs lists them. They don't want to be labeled as specializing in disabilities. If your student has already applied, you can call the disabilities coordinator for the school and ask questions.

This information isn't on the school websites, how do you find it? That's why US News and World Reports rankings were so popular, but it is a terrible way to evaluate a school. Not all the things mentioned (this evening) are important to each student. Have the kids ask questions while at the school. Parents can call and ask questions if the information is not on the website. Then families should weigh all the information they get.

Joan mentioned Derek Bok's book [Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More as interesting.](#)

A parent mentioned that it can be hard for a student while trying to get through courses before getting into their major.

A parent asked what does it mean if a college seems especially interested in your child? Now the colleges are trying to impress your child, but you should do an evaluation of the school that goes beyond that.