**Amigos de Birchwood PTO Meeting Notes: November 15, 2023**

Location: Birchwood Elementary School Library

6-7pm

1. Guest Speaker: Principal Micah Smith (6:00-6:45pm)  
   Micah Smith introduced himself, shared a bit about his professional background as well as his family, and then provided an overview of Birchwood as well as details of his Entry Plan. His presentation slide deck can be found [here](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WrXSK7unRIkARPMdDJHEWTerMw9H6HMc/view?usp=sharing).
   1. Micah’s background: Micah worked at Birchwood, Cordata, and Alderwood before returning to Birchwood. He has a wife and two children.
   2. Birchwood overview: Micah provided an overview of our school including the following statistics.
      1. 25 new students; 297 returning (not counting incoming kindergarteners)
      2. 50 students who qualify for [McKinney Vento](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/McKinney%E2%80%93Vento_Homeless_Assistance_Act) services
      3. 277 students with English as primary home language; 87 students with other primary home language.
      4. Student access: 55 with IEPs (Individualized Education Plans); 308 without.
      5. Staff: Certificated staff: 4 new; 14 returning. Classified staff: 2 new; 13 returning.
      6. Reduction in some staff hours compared to last year: some staff went from 6.5 to 5 hours, but only lost one staff member due to budget cuts: Title 1 Reading teacher.
      7. Every grade has 3 classes, except 4th grade has 2.
   3. Entry Plan: A common practice for incoming principals is to complete a first semester Entry Plan. Part of Micah’s process for developing the Entry Plan involves interviewing all returning staff, district staff, and new new staff; conducting family and student meetings; and distributing a survey in winter (coming soon) to gather more feedback from families. The results of this survey and Entry Plan will be shared later in the year.
   4. IB Renewal: Micah shared about the school’s reauthorization visits to evaluate our IB ([International Baccalaureate](https://www.ibo.org/about-the-ib/)) program. This process produced a 30-page report with feedback and recommendations which will be disseminated into more digestible action steps to share with the school community later in the year.
      1. Part of the IB program is common language around learner attributes such as being caring principled thinkers. The school is fostering these attributes throughout the school in various ways. You’ll see signage throughout the school and hear staff and teachers recognize and integrate the learner language attributes across students’ academic and social/emotional learning.
      2. One parent suggested leadership sharing with parents what the school is doing well regarding IB.
   5. SEL Training: Micah spoke about the [SEL (Social Emotional Learning)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social%e2%80%93emotional_learning) Training which staff undergo and staff’s commitment to positive reinforcement. The training involves 10 lessons for each grade level and includes an understanding of trauma and the brain, establishing classroom norms, problem solving, supportive team response, and the importance of consistency. Micah noted that positive reinforcement takes the same amount of energy as being correctional, but encourages the student and their peers to act according to principals while empowering future positive problem-solving.
   6. Small Groups: Micah then invited parents to form small groups and write down questions/concerns on index cards for further discussion. Here are some of the questions and answers that were addressed:
      1. *What can parents do to support more funding for the school, specifically for Special Education?*  
         Micah spoke about the importance of levies and bonds in funding public education. Everyone was encouraged to participate in the upcoming levy renewals vote in February. Levies in particular fund a lot of SPED. They are set at a dollar amount regardless of if your property taxes increased. The two levies are for facilities and technology. Levies fund students and teachers while bonds fund facilities. Micah also said the state’s funding model is far from perfect and advocacy at the state level is paramount. He mentioned a November 9 [*Seattle Times* article](https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/editorials/wa-has-the-wealth-but-not-the-will-to-fund-schools-equitably/) outlining the disparities in our state’s education funding distribution.
      2. *Can you discuss the recent changes to the parent-teacher conference model?*   
         Micah empathized with parents’ concerns about the changes to the conference model and explained that while the change has equity at the heart of it, there’s still work to do to fill the hole in an equitable way. The traditional model was logistically challenging for both families and for schools, and hearing from your child’s teacher once per year with conferences was getting outdated. Sometimes, a family that the teacher most felt they needed to communicate with were the hardest to reach with this model. So this two-way, year-round communication model is an effort to foster more frequent contact between families and the school. He acknowledged that in some ways this newer model could add pressure on families to reach out to teachers, and MIcah will speak with staff to be mindful of how they’re communicating with families to ease that pressure and encourage ongoing collaboration.
      3. *Parents expressed concerns about the needs of all students being met due to additional staff hours being cut and the inclusion model putting more demand on teachers and classroom dynamics, as well as the ongoing impacts of the pandemic.*   
         (This was a very thoughtful conversation and is a bit more difficult to recap accurately; my apologies for any nuance I may not capture in my summary below.) Micah acknowledged these concerns and provided some encouraging points. While Spanish, Library, and some classified/non-direct student service hours ended up reduced due to budget cuts, they were very careful to preserve all hours for roles that are essential for keeping kids regulated – including providers of social, emotional, and behavior supports such as counselor, SPED teachers, and the Dean of Students. Changes to a more [inclusive model](https://ospi.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/special-education-funding-and-finance/inclusionary-practices-professional-development-project) took effect in classrooms last year, and concerns were expressed about the secondary stress this may have created in classrooms due to greater demands on staff and peers. Micah noted that Birchwood has making efforts toward greater inclusion and working on providing access for learning for students with a variety of needs (food insecurity, language background, learning need, transportation challenges) for years, and now has three certificated SPED teachers to further that support.  This is an increase in 2 teachers from the 2021 school year. Micah noted that the main change in systematic inclusion at the District level is that Developmental Kindergarten was combined and rolled up from last year’s Pre-K/Developmental K roll-up with additional supports from last year. He encouraged continued communications with your child’s teacher about any concerns, and noted his and staff’s emphasis on helping students regulate to prevent any secondary trauma.
      4. Bus line safety concerns.   
         Transportation has requested a change to bus lines due to safety concerns about the tight corners within the parking lot. An incident previously occurred where a car was clipped by a bus. Based on the number of Birchwood students experiencing homelessness also means more buses. They are working on early
      5. School’s plan to resume assemblies.   
         This is an active conversation at leadership meetings and they hope to have a clearer approach outlined by January.
2. Amigos de Birchwood PTO updates:
   1. Katie Luerkens, PTO Co-Chair, provided a brief introduction to the PTO, including its mission of connecting families to the school. She  shared what our funding goes toward and how we raise it. She mentioned the need for day-of volunteers and help with planning our events. She provided the list of PTO-sponsored school events with a brief overview of each, calling out our upcoming Gingerbread Night and Book Exchange on December 7, 2023.