

NEW PARENT PANEL NIGHT

The questions and answers that follow were posed either on or before October 8, 2013, the night of the panel. Time did not allow the panelists to get to all of the questions, so some were answered after the fact via email. The information below is not a direct transcription, but rather a summary of the information presented.

What is the overall organizational structure of the school?

See the attached diagram depicting the structure of TCGIS and how it relates to the GAI, the school board, and the PTO.

What is the GAI? What does it mean to be TCGIS's authorizer?

Each Minnesota charter school is required to have an authorizer, which is an outside, nonprofit organization that holds collateral, and that is charged with looking at a charter school's performance and holding the school accountable. The Germanic-American Institute, or GAI, is the current authorizer for TCGIS. As such, the GAI requires an annual review from the school, including relevant documentation to be turned in to the GAI. If any questions arise, they are dealt with. For example, if MCA test scores are down, the GAI makes sure the school comes up with a plan to address the issue. An authorizer also serves as an intermediary between TCGIS and the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE). A charter school's authorizer can change over the years. We currently have an agreement with the GAI to serve as TCGIS's authorizer through the year 2017, at which point we will have a chance to renew that relationship or seek out a new one.

How many people sit on the TCGIS School Board?

The TCGIS board normally has 9 members, but may, at times, have up to 12. The general makeup of the board must consist of a combination of teachers, parents, and interested outside community members. If particular expertise is needed, an extra appointment may be made, limited in both time and scope. A normal board term lasts three years.

What committees are associated with the Board?

The TCGIS board oversees five committees: Executive, Governance, Equity and Inclusivity, Finance, and Communication/Development. Each committee is chaired by a current board member, but parents and staff are welcome to sit on a committee as well.

Executive Committee — consists of Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer; handles director performance reviews; checks in to be sure board runs smoothly and that everyone is being heard

Governance Committee — keeps tabs on the board itself; makes sure rules are being followed; looks out for new members; leads annual training of board members

Equity and Inclusivity Committee — works to enhance diversity

Finance Committee — meets regularly; prepares for audits; helps decide what kind of fund balance (reserves in accounts) to maintain

Communication/Development Committee — raises money; helps to recruit new families; handles messaging around new school building; helps to create positive face for outside community

Who can vote in Board elections?

All staff and TCGIS parents are eligible to vote in school board elections.

Does the Board also do fundraising for the school?

Yes, the board also does some fundraising. Often it is for a big project, like purchasing middle-school materials for the library, funding the Amity intern program, or covering the costs of playscape planning and equipment. Board fundraising differs in that there is a focus on partnering with other organizations — for example, with the German American Chamber of Commerce (GACC) or with Razoo, for Give to the Max Day. The Board also tries to capitalize on any personal or business connections that parents may have.

To whom can I send announcements seen about grants?

You can contact Carley Stuber, head of the Communication/Development Committee, with information or questions about grant opportunities (cmstuber@earthlink.net).

Are there any restrictions for Board members as to where they live, how close to the school, etc?

No, there aren't.

Who sits on the Special Education Advisory Committee?

Any interested parent can be a part of this committee.

What is the Amity Committee?

The Amity Committee helps assemble and then support a team of German-speaking interns who come to teach at our school each year. This year, TCGIS will host 28 interns (8 full year, 10 each semester) through Amity Institute, a nonprofit group working with people from all over the world, ages 20–30, who want to become teachers. Most of the interns are still studying, but some are already done with their studies. One very important part of the committee's work is to find host families for all the interns each year. Host families must agree to provide interns with their own private rooms and meals every day. Each intern is generally assigned to one classroom, though they are "attached" to a specific teacher in the upper grades. Each intern has one day a week off from school.

Why should I host an intern?

Interns can be quite helpful with the kids in their host families. Hosting an intern also provides great exposure to the German language and culture right in your home.

How do I go about hosting an intern?

If you would like to get information on hosting an intern, you can contact Nicole Grenz (nicole_grenz@hotmail.com), and she will send a Host Family application, along with other information that may answer some questions you may have. Once you know you are ready to host, you may complete the Host Family application and email it to Nicole or Darcy Rindelaub at darcydeboer@hotmail.com. She will then set up a time to do a home visit with your family. You may also wish to include the time frame for which you are available/open to hosting. There is also a link on the TCGIS website for more information. Look under the "About Us" section, and click on "Amity Interns."

We live in an area with no bus service to the school. Is it okay to host?

Anyone is welcome to host. Having no bus service is not a deal-breaker.

Are the interns allowed to drive?

Yes. Although Amity Institute recommends *not* to let them, the interns can drive here, and many families choose to let them use their cars. The interns' visas and German driver's licenses allow them to drive here. Be sure to check with your insurance company to make sure additional drivers are covered on your auto policy.

When will construction be complete? Why not on time as originally estimated?

Phase I of the school construction project is complete; Phase II has hit some unknowns, which we are currently working through. Construction has temporarily stopped because of things uncovered during excavation, including arsenic in the soil, foundations of homes that stood here before the school was built, and a large beam in the soil that required an adjustment to the overall design. The increased project costs are now being reconciled. Once started again, the project is expected to take another five and a half months to complete. There would be an extra \$50,000 cost to continue working through the winter.

[Note: A decision was made to delay the completion of the new addition until the spring of 2014. We have negotiated with the builder to resume construction on March 1 with a completion date of no later than July 15. For more details, see the School Board Update in the November 7 Elternbrief.]

What steps has the Board taken in addressing construction project oversight?

The Board has taken several steps to address oversight of the construction project. They asked Welsh to replace the project manager as they were unhappy with his day-to-day oversight of the crew. A Construction Committee was also formed to address concerns with the project. Three members of the Board sit on that committee: Marcus Sheire, Jennifer Buck, and Renee Moelders. Considering these additional costs, the Construction Committee is now weighing how best to

proceed — forge ahead this winter at increased cost for completion in spring, or wait until spring with a new expected completion date sometime in the summer. A decision will be made after reviewing the impact on teachers, finances, staff, etc. We expect a decision to be made very soon, possibly calling a special session next week.

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There was an email sent about getting rid of rocks on the playground and lockers installed before winter.... Is that still on the docket?

Yes, the rocks are going as we speak. They are still deciding on lockers.

[Note: Lockers have since been installed on all three levels of the school, just in time for the cold, snowy weather.]

When should we expect to get a school handbook?

The school handbook is now available as a pdf on the school website. Look under the “Current Families” tab.

When should we expect the school directory?

The office plans to have it ready for the last Elternbrief in October, 10/31. If families need a printed copy in addition to the pdf version, they can sign up and pick it up at parent/teacher conferences in early November.

[Note: The Student and Family Directory can now be found on the school website under the “Current Families” tab.]

Could current families receive a school directory at the beginning of the school year?

That is our goal. The transition to a new building delayed that possibility this year.

Why are parents not allowed in the school, besides the issue around parking in the neighborhood and security? This has not been clearly explained. What exactly is the policy on visitors in the school?

The current policy is now more in line with general school requirements for security. Charter schools are different from regular public schools in many ways, and we got away with some things in the past. As we grow, we'd rather be inconveniently strict rather than losing a child at the end of the day. Buzzing in and checking in with the office are all standard procedure in most schools these days. The MDE (Minnesota Department of Education) does require that we know all adults that are in the building at any given time — hence, the need to sign in. These new security measures are, in fact, simply complying with state laws. Increased parent traffic over the years is another reason for the change; having more parents around simply makes it difficult to start school on time, etc.

From the teachers' point of view, it was all very cozy in the past, but it would take a long time for students to settle in. It is easier for the children to settle down when parents are not there. They can play more with their fellow students and learn some responsibility. The teachers are also trying to find ways to create more face time with parents. One example is this Friday's “Parent Social Hour,” when parents are invited to stick their heads into the classroom and mingle with other parents outside in the hall. Email teachers to set up a meeting or a visit to school. Teachers are still very open to interacting and communicating with parents.

The security needs, settling issues, etc. were not clearly communicated at first, and this communication gaffe was off-putting. The stress seemed to be on how the neighbors felt and being sensitive to them, rather than addressing any concerns or needs of the school families themselves. The school was worried about the community reaction in the beginning. According to one attendee with a friend in the neighborhood, it was really only a handful of people reacting negatively; this person heard nothing but good things from a near neighbor to the school.

Does this policy also extend to classroom observation? What exactly is the policy on classroom observation?

All visits to a classroom, including observation, should be prearranged with the teacher or staff.

If the parents are told not to park in the neighborhood for 10–20 minutes in the morning and afternoon, why does staff park directly across the street? Why not in the lot down the street?

We asked parents not to park across the street so children are not crossing the street during pick-up and drop-off. This was not the case for staff parking. However, since we have received some neighborhood complaints and as winter is approaching, we are now plowing the Presbyterian Church across from the Aula, and teachers are encouraged to park in the Street Car Station or on Argyle and Oxford (side streets off Como) to reduce parking on Van Slyke.

What exactly is the policy on tardy arrival?

Students should be in class and ready for morning circle at 8:15 am. Arriving after that is considered tardy.

What are the discipline policies of the school?

Please refer to the school handbook on the TCGIS website under “Current Families.”

What happens if my child is bullied?

TCGIS administration takes bullying very seriously and follows the Anti-Bullying Policy passed by TCGIS in 2010. Please refer to the school handbook for more information.

When will the classes be mixed, and what criteria is used for mixing?

Classes are mixed after the kindergarten year going into first grade, then again after second grade going into third. Factors such as German language ability, special education needs, and gender balance are all taken under consideration.

Can you explain the teacher evaluation process?

Teacher evaluations are based on Charlotte Danielson’s best practices in six areas of competency: Planning & Preparation, Classroom Environment, Instruction, Professional Reflection, Immersion Strategies, and School-wide responsibilities. Teachers are formally evaluated at least two times a year — once in the fall and again in the spring. Teachers receive the criteria sheets in advance, fill out a pre-observation form, and reflect in a post-observation form. Teachers have the opportunity to have conversations with administration before and after the lessons.

How do you do background checks on teachers from Germany?

Background checks are done by the U.S. government as part of the U.S. work visa process.

How much do grade-level teachers coordinate and collaborate on curriculum development and lesson planning?

TCGIS grade-level teachers collaborate on a regular basis on curriculum development and lesson planning. On average, the grade-level teachers meet twice a week as part of professional learning communities. In addition, all teachers participate in professional workdays and early release days that include curriculum development activities. TCGIS uses a curriculum mapping system called Atlas Rubicon in grades K–8 that allows teachers to plan, update, and track curriculum units. Atlas allows teachers to integrate the curriculum with key academic standards and to share knowledge — e.g., reports, scope and sequence, or assessment — in one place in order to make informed decisions. At the beginning of each year, parents are invited to Curriculum Night to learn more about the grade-level curriculum planning process.

Who oversees curriculum development?

Administration works with designated curriculum leaders in each subject for K–4 and 5–8.

What are your thoughts on parent involvement?

Parent involvement is critical to the social and academic success of students. It is also an important component to the success of the charter school overall. Parents serve on numerous committees and the school board to help guide the direction of the school.

How do I volunteer at school? Can I even do that?

If a parent is interested in volunteering, please contact the front office with your availability as well as what kind of volunteer work you would be interested in. We are in the process of hiring a volunteer coordinator, but the front office will do its best to fill any needs in the meantime.

What is the plan to replace Elternkontakts, specifically their communication between classroom teachers and parents?

In the early years at TCGIS, EKs were the communication bridge between teachers and parents. However, they have not played that role for several years. Instead, most of their communications have been to disseminate PTO-related information (re: Maskenball, Auflauf, etc.). They have also done things like coordinate classroom potlucks and social outings, both of which they will continue to do. Teachers now have class websites and communicate directly with parents via weekly emails. Parents are welcome to email teachers and/or schedule appointments to meet with teachers, in addition to attending fall and spring parent/teacher conferences.

All that is to say that the role of EK has evolved over the years. The original need is now filled by the classroom teachers, and as a result, the PTO has made the decision to change the volunteer description of the EK to more accurately reflect what the role actually involves. Below is a description of the Elternkontakt role as it now appears in this year's PTO Guide:

The role of the EK now is exclusively to help facilitate and support community at respective grade levels at TCGIS. EKs will no longer be asked to support the classroom teachers on their own, collect monetary contributions for teacher gifts, or communicate non-PTO/community information to the classes. EKs will plan (with volunteer help from other parents) grade level "meet-ups," picnics, or potlucks outside of school and may assist teachers with classroom celebrations.

How do I contact my child's teacher to find out how my child is doing?

Parents and teachers are still working to find opportunities to communicate more with each other. Teachers have been told NOT to have conversations at pick-up time, and parents need to be respectful of those policies. Parents should refrain from asking teachers questions during drop-off, so as not to take away from classroom instructional time, or during pick-up, out of respect for other parents who are trying to collect their children in a timely fashion. Pulling up and sitting to talk with teachers at pick-up time blocks parking and creates traffic/safety issues, particularly on the Van Slyke side of the school. The teachers themselves are busy — they have to dismiss the kids. The best way to have a productive conversation with a teacher is to make an appointment. Emailing is another great way to start a dialogue.

Does every teacher send weekly emails? Specialists also? Middle school? The reason I am asking is because I get emails from some teachers, but not others.

The expectation for homeroom and subject area teachers is to send weekly emails. Some specialists teach over 50% of the students and weekly emails are not the expectation. Teacher websites are a good resource for these teachers.

Is it possible to consider having office hours?

Yes, but it is a time management issue. This was tried in the past but wasn't terribly successful. Maybe something else or similar could work.

How do we know the teachers' email addresses?

These are listed on the back of the PTO calendar. They used to be listed on the school website. We will suggest that these are again added to the website. All staff email addresses follow this formula: first letter of first name + last name + @tcgis.org. For example, Susanne Grimm's address is sgrimm@tcgis.org.

What is PowerSchool? When will I get access to it?

PowerSchool is our student reporting system. Parents can use it to access their children's grades and lunch balances, and to check attendance records. In order to use it, you must first set up an account. Here is a link to a tutorial on how to set up an account: <http://tcgis.org/documents/powerschool-parent-portal-user-tutorial-now-step-step-podcasts>.

How do parent/teacher conferences work? Are we assigned a time sometime on 11/7 or 11/8, or do we sign up for a time?

Starting about two weeks before conferences take place, families will be asked to sign up for a time to meet with each teacher, using an online registration program. The school plans to use the same conference system in the spring.

Would the PTO be willing and able to fund a program to help foster German language interaction between kids (i.e., rewarding children who interact with their peers in German, as opposed to in English)? For example, having staff hand out “tickets” when they observe this kind of interaction and then providing staff with small prizes to award when the children accumulate a certain number of tickets.

This is a curricular issue better dealt with in the classroom setting than through the PTO. Several teachers do reward their classes when they speak solely German in the classroom. For example, Frau Bindert’s 3rd graders are rewarded with free-play time on Friday afternoon if they have spoken German during that week.

How do I submit something to be included in the Elternbrief?

To submit something for the Elternbrief, please send an email with the information you would like to include to Blaine Strobe at bstrobe@tcgis.org. The deadline for submissions is 8:00 pm Tuesday evening for the Elternbrief that will be sent out that Thursday.

Does the school collect Box Tops for Education and Campbell’s Labels for Education?

Yes! We collect Box Tops and Labels for Education. Please drop them off in the main office.

How do I sign up and pay for stuff? (School lunch? After-school activities? “Got Deutsch?” bumper stickers?)

To pay for lunch, after-school activities, bumper stickers, or field trips, cash or checks can be dropped off in the main office. Parents can also pay for lunch via RevTrak, our online payment portal, which is available on our website. RevTrak accepts both credit and debit cards.

My child goes to the office because he/she does not feel well. Then what?

If your child comes to the office and isn’t feeling well, the first thing we typically do is take his or her temperature. If s/he has a fever (over 100° F), we call home. If there is no fever, we let the child rest for awhile and then check again to see if s/he is feeling better. We try to encourage the child to return to class. If a child throws up or is found to have head lice, we call home right away, and parents need to come and pick up their child. If a child comes down to the office repeatedly during the day, we call home and notify the parents.

Is there a good way to send snow pants, etc. to school each day?

Students go outside every day (with rare exceptions), so please dress them accordingly. Put your child’s name on everything! Use a marker to write directly on the items, buy labels to iron on, or even tie special ribbons on things. For winter, send snow pants, a hat, and gloves or mittens — even if kids don’t like to wear them. If you do forget, the office usually has spare mittens, snow pants, etc. in the lost and found for children to borrow. Students are required to have separate outdoor shoes (boots for in winter), indoor shoes, and gym shoes. Gym shoes (*Sportschuhe*) CAN also be used as indoor shoes (*Hausschuhe*).

A few parent tips for how to manage these items:

- Buy one pair of snow pants for school and keep a second pair at home, eliminating the need to drag them back and forth each day.
- Put a list in your child’s backpack of what to bring home every day.
- Have your child put gloves in his or her lunchbox after recess.
- Periodically check the things at your house to be sure they are *actually* yours.

Where is the lost and found? Or is there even one?

There is a lost and found in the school, located in a large cabinet at the bottom of the steps on the Van Slyke entrance. (It is already overflowing!) The cabinet is right in front of Frau Wallace's library. Parents are welcome to come inside and take a look, and kids are encouraged to go through the bins themselves. Teachers also suggest sending two kids to the office to look for missing items, since the kids all recognize their classmates' things. One parent has taken on the lost and found. Items that have not been claimed by a certain date will be given away. Families will be notified in advance.

Which committee is responsible for lunch provider selection, etc?

There is not really a committee dedicated to that. Blaine Strobe in the front office is the current lunch coordinator and could answer questions about the program.

The after-school activities... If a parent wanted to volunteer to lead one, are there guidelines established? How does one create one? Who would a person contact for more information?

Parents interested in teaching an after-school class should contact Molly Kalda at mkalda@tcgis.org. Molly typically sends out announcements and information about how to get involved in the Elternbrief, and also in direct email blasts.

Please tell me about post-8th grade matriculations to high schools.

Nine graduating 8th grade students went on to the following schools this year: St. Paul Academy (2), Mounds View (1), St. Anthony Village (1), South, Mpls (2), Washburn, Mpls (1), East Ridge, Woodbury (1), and De La Salle, Mpls (1). The Germanic-American Institute is working with Mary-Fred Bausman-Watkins to offer ongoing German in an online course. Students are having success and joined for events with the German exchange students here in September. As TCGIS graduates more students, it will be possible to gather more data and create more post-TCGIS learning opportunities.

Organizational Structure of TCGIS and the TCGIS PTO

