

Garden Oaks Elementary  
SDMC Special Session – April 21, 2010  
3:30pm – 4:30pm

- **Ground Rules**

Parties agree to take turns speaking and not interrupt each other

Parties agree not to blame, attack, or engage in put-downs. They will ask questions of each other only for the purposes of gaining clarity and understanding

Parties agree to listen respectfully and sincerely

*In the unlikely event that these guidelines are violated,  
Ms. Pollock may adjourn the meeting early.*

- **Why are we here today?**

- **History of Garden Oaks and the genesis of the Montessori program - How did we make it this far?**

HISD's commitment to Garden Oaks' Montessori and traditional communities

**Parental** commitment to the Garden Oaks community

**Community** Involvement – Spark Park, Home Tour, Volunteering/Mentoring. tradition

- **Who are we at Garden Oaks Elementary today?**

- **Tuition-based PK programs in HISD**

HISD is now offering pre-kindergarten on a tuition basis to students who do not meet the eligibility requirements to attend pre-kindergarten for free.

Parents may enroll their four-year-old child (child must be four years of age on or before September 1 of a given school year) in a full-day pre-kindergarten program at participating neighborhood schools on a space-available basis. The state-set fee is \$4,290 per year, which may be paid in 10 installments of \$429.

Pg 20 Garden Oaks Student Handbook – Tuition due 1<sup>st</sup> of every month

Garden Oaks offers both traditional and Montessori PK programs

<http://www.houstonprek.org/>

- **SDMC Budget sub-Committee**

- **SDMC's Grant ad hoc Committee** – Meeting April 22 @ 3:30pm



# Garden Oaks Elementary

“A Place Where Children Flourish!”

**Lindsey Pollock, Principal**

**Moses Diaz, Assistant Principal**

At 3:30 pm on April 21, 2010, Ms. Pollock, Principal of Garden Oaks, convened an open, special SDMC Session in the school library to present an overview and administrative perspective of the changes currently facing the Garden Oaks Elementary School community. Attending were not only SDMC members, but parents, both of traditional and Montessori students, community members, and Mr. D'Angelo from Central Region accounting of HISD, approximately 50 people. Ms Pollock went over the ground rules for the meeting as published on the agenda (attached) and reported that the genesis of the meeting was a request for information.

She began by recalling that our collective view of the school was radically changed on 2/16 of this year when the prospect of changing to a Montessori campus was presented by HISD. Everyone was taken by surprise, and could see there was potential in the idea, but the difficulty was that we were told it was a "done deal".

There have been both traditional and Montessori programs on this campus for 16 years, but it was now time to discuss topics that are productive as we move forward. Garden Oaks has a slogan - it is a place where children flourish. We were reminded that children are not just our primary focus, but our only focus.

However, she continued, she has noticed that our community has begun to unravel. Friendships have become estranged, the community "atom" has split. She has had children crying in her office from the stress due to these tensions and worries over having to move to a new school, and parents crying because their friend is shunning them. What kind of legacy is this for our children?, she asked. We are applying for a Federal Assistance Grant, that has been determined by the school board. We have had plenty of time to voice our opinions. She feels that it is now her imperative as a leader to see that this strife ends. It is important to close this chapter on our campus and stop this strife for the sake of our children.

Ms Pollock recalled that way it is here, with Montessori parents and traditional parents working together, with traditional parents attending the Pancake Breakfast and Friends of Montessori attending PTA meetings. She recalled joint projects and community support for the "whole" school - parent work days, YMCA participation, the resparking of the Spark Park, monthly meetings of civic club on campus, volunteering and mentoring, St Rose Lima and other business partners. She recalled the climate of cooperation as parents from both strands conversed, planned watering schedules, set up play dates and birthday parties.

She reported that after the frost and the drought, she despaired of preparing the campus for the Home Tour, but Vena Golt kept encouraging her, saying the parents could do it. For the last two weekends, she has seen people working together on the grounds, and she can now see the fruits of that collective labor, new life beginning in the gardens and grounds. That is her hope for this community - for the students, parents, teachers - to see new life emerging and enjoying the fruits of our labor.

We cannot change the past but must build on it to create programs that serve our community now. And we have a rich history, she continued. She pointed to Dr. Patricia Williams, a member of the SDMC, is a Garden Oaks alumnus. While our "whole" school is a Title I HISD campus, where "all" students get the services mandated by law, 16 years ago a group of parents collaborated with HISD to create a Montessori component within our school. HISD agreed to support this program

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in such a way as to ensure the fulfillment of the essential elements of Montessori as recommended by the American Montessori Association. As an HISD school, we have limited resources. We could not have made it to where we are today without support of a community that embraces the school. Our parental commitment has few rivals, whether we are speaking of the FOM or PTA, and others are astounded at the magnitude.

She asked us to reflect on who are we today, all of us here in this room, and where are we headed. Many people in Houston are interested in Montessori, the district advisory board tells us. This school, based on the history of an established program, is to have a Montessori focus. The committee agreed that there will be an environmental science overlay to honor and continue the efforts we have been making for the last two years when we started talking about becoming a magnet school for environmental science. Even knowing that no new magnets were being created, we all wanted to work together on something we all agreed on, and we did. We formed after-school clubs such as the Science clubs with Ms. Morris donating her time after school. We have continued this effort this year, and are grateful that this thrust can be merged with the focus on Montessori technique.

We will be in the planning stage next year, and, as stated repeatedly (including in a fact sheet on Monday and a flyer sent home today), for students in grades Kindergarten and up, nothing will change in the current program in 2010-2011 regarding Montessori and traditional programs. HISD has professional grant writers working on this project, and, if granted, we would receive over \$2 million in funding for materials, supplies, teacher training, conference support, and building upgrades to make our campus shine.

At this point in our transformation, cool heads must prevail. The sky is not falling. The discussion should be what we can do to move ahead with programs that are fiscally responsible and sustainable. Both traditional and Montessori programs receive no funding for 3 year olds, and only half a PUA (annual student allotment) for 4 year olds who qualify. If they don't qualify, they pay tuition (both programs). Mr. D'Angelo noted that this was more revenue than if they did qualify (see discussion near end of meeting for clarification). He also noted that the PUA for next year has been reduced to \$3485.

In Ms. Pollock's judgement, if the district committed to a program, we must do it in a quality way. Indicating with a nod that Mr. D'Angelo was part of the negotiations, Ms. Pollock reported that she has worked to affect some significant changes.

\*There has been tighter fiscal accountability of tuition money - collections have increased (2 years ago we collected before \$60,000, while last year it increased to \$90,000 and \$135,000 this year).

\*Montessori assistants are no longer salaried, but hired hourly for 6 hours a day

\*We have asked HISD for a waiver to receive funds for a limited # of 3 yr olds as there are other early childhood programs in our district who receive this funding, and we are awaiting that resolution

\*We have monitored to ensure that tuition is applied to this school year

\*We are currently negotiating a new memorandum of understanding with Friends of Montessori. We are lucky to have a dedicated parent organization who, in spite of efforts to draft a new memo of understanding, has continued to operate. They are living up to their end of the bargain, and have paid every bill presented to them by HISD, whose accounting department is in charge of billing.

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At this point, Ms. Morris asked to know what was their end (of the bargain). She requested a copy of the memorandum stating they would receive a bill. Ms Pollock said that she and Mr. D'Angelo had been in meetings on campus and regional levels, with district level accounting and the regional superintendent, Ms. Tamez, and with legal services. Ms Morris then wished to know the result. Mr D'Angelo said that calculations from the accounting department showed FOM for 2003-4 paying \$54,825 under the previous agreement. Again, Ms. Morris wanted copies of the fee statement dated 2002, asking the group if anyone had a copy so as to understand where we had been. Vena asked why it was important and Ms. Morris stated to understand our history. Mr. D'Angelo stated that he would get Ms. Morris the 2002 contract, though he warned that it was very obsolete, with the Northwest District sponsoring the funds no longer in existence.

There was some concern that the new program won't start if there is not funding, and that this upcoming year will not have any additional funding, There were concerns that we would experience budget problems. Ms Morris recalled this year's stoppage of after-school tutoring. At this point, Ms. Pollock countered by saying that while tutoring was curtailed for a few weeks, the emphasis of the sessions were re-examined to ensure that tutorials were targeted and effective. They resumed after a few weeks with a focus on grades 3 - 5 and those teachers were still paid. Moreover, Mr. Valladares noted that tutorials were interrupted and restarted a few weeks later. Also, a school day interventionist was employed and Montessori teaching assistants were helping with tutoring during the day.

Vena Golt pointed out that while she agrees that if Montessori costs more to operate then overage expenses must be paid for the upcoming year, but she saw no use in wasting time with researching the history.

Ms. Hernandez, a parent, yelled that she thinks we are trying to make this an all white school, claiming discrimination against Hispanics. At that point, Ms Pollock referred to the ground rules published on the agenda, saying that we were a rainbow school and would continue to serve all children equally.

Ms. Pollock returned the discussion back to fiscal responsibility, stating that this year the school had sought out grants and business opportunities, and had received 50% off the cost of Reasoning Minds, got computer donations, and the services of 4 graduate level Social Work interns. The specifics of the tuition-based PreK program was quantified as an annual cost to the parent of \$4290 if child does not qualify, payable over a 10 month period. Any further information on programs can be found on the HISD website.

In conclusion, Ms. Pollock hoped that we can all share the belief that Garden Oaks is a special place filled with special people, with people who have dedicated their lives to children. The innuendos, the personal attacks, must stop because it is impacting our children. If for no other reason, think about the children. She closed the meeting with a poem from Maya Angelou that stressed civility and regarding other people's feelings. She then thanked everyone for coming, and said she would stay for questions. Ms. Pollock circulated in through the room thanking those in attendance and giving our lapel pins on cards that stated, "You are an Essential Piece".

Mr. D'Angelo wanted one more word to finish the conversation with Ms Morris, and said that in 2007 there was another payment of \$20,000. Ms. Tatum from FOM had a more complete

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payment schedule, and gave it to Ms. Morris. Ms. Morris was also given the name of the person at HISD that sends the bills to Montessori. Ms. Morris said that she had still not received the answers to questions she had requested a week ago, and asked that this be reflected in the minutes.

The meeting adjourned.

Ms. Hernandez who had previously yelled that she felt there was discrimination against Hispanics again yelled her anger about the questions not being answered, and said there was racism here. She said that Dr. Grier was a "bad weed" and that Hispanics will be put at the back of the bus. Another parent yelled back at Ms. Hernandez that she was a racist and that the Montessori program was 55% Hispanic. At that point, Ms. Pollock reminded everyone that the meeting was adjourned and that ground rules had been broken. She directed everyone to please leave the room.

As many of the members of the group stood to leave and Mr. D'Angelo said to Ms. Morris, that in his opinion, there is no current agreement. At the end of last school year, everyone agreed that there was no longer an agreement. It is the custom of HISD to annually review agreements of this sort, and no annual agreement had been ratified since 2004. That agreement limited costs to no more than 110% of the 6 year old estimate. Again, it is no longer valid. The process of creating a new agreement was started last school year and there has been a draft submitted to the HISD legal department where it currently is. Ms. Morris requested a copy of the draft, but Mr. D'Angelo said it was just in the form of handwritten notes and nothing was signed.

A retired HISD principal, Phillipa Young, spoke up and said that her school went through this same thing. She noted that most of the people in attendance were parents, and thought that was great. She advised that the power to make many of the decisions discussed here is at the HISD board level, and should be addressed there. She stated that at the campus level, the types of things being asked about are not within the realm of the principal and that she supported what Ms. Pollock was talking about.