

TJ PTSA Virtual Coffee with the Principal, Dr. Ann Bonitatibus
Friday, November 11th
9 AM - 10 AM

Discussion Summary

Q1. What are the administration's main goals and initiatives for the school year?

- Main goal: Students' wellness (emotional, mental, physical and academic)
- Challenge Success (<https://tjhsst.fcps.edu/resources/challenge-success-program-tjhsst>)
 - Decoupling workload and rigor
 - Promoting the importance of sleep
 - Managing expectations -> teachers to students, peer to peer, parents to students
- White paper on '[Why A College's "Fit" Matters More Than Its Ranking](#)'

- Other initiative: SIIP (School Innovation and Improvement Plan)
(<https://isweb.fcps.edu/ESSER/?schoolcode=300&school=Jefferson%20Sci/Tech%20High%20School>)
Example:
 - Intervention when grades are lower than B in English
 - Focus on giving solid Algebra skills to the freshmen as the foundation for future math classes

- Focus on increasing face-to-face interactions between students and between students and teachers
- Portrait of a Graduate (<https://www.fcps.edu/about-fcps/portrait-graduate>)
 - Communicator, Collaborator, Ethical and Global Citizen, etc

- Academic Help Initiative: Tutor.com
 - Access in Schoology
 - Free resources from K-12
 - Includes upper level math courses, ACT/SAT
 - On demand 24/7 or scheduled sessions
 - Chat / Video options (sessions will be recorded)
 - Can bookmark favorite tutor

Q2. Some parents have asked about what FCPS and TJ are doing about the unique trauma to students and academic consequences resulting from the pandemic. Would you please share about what lingering effects you are seeing from the pandemic on our students, in terms of mental health as well as academic success, and what FCPS and the school's strategies are to address these effects?

- Observation: isolation even in the classroom, some students still preferred to be alone
- Arrested development in social skills (freshmen/sophomores were not able to learn social skills usually developed during middle school years)
- For those who were comfortable being alone at home, some developed social anxiety
- Students, in general, have to relearn how to be in social settings, being "in the moment", not comparing or worry about physical appearances
- Counselor and teachers receiving training to recognize clues and signs of a crisis
- This year, TJ has a full-time school psychologist on site
- Using ESSER Grants to fund before and after school programs to foster student engagement

- FCPS continues doing mental health screeners
- TJ Advisory periods during Anchor Days (Mondays); SEL (Social Emotional Lessons)
- Student's Mental Health Coalition (MHC)
- PTSA Health and Wellness Committee events and programming
- Student Forums and Minds Matter
- Human Relation Commissions with parent rep

- Academic impacts:
 - similar to all schools nationwide
 - across the board and discipline areas
 - mostly felt on the subjects that require mastery on the previous levels, such as Math and World Languages
- Will take 2-3 years to catch-up. Not so much of 'learning loss' but more 'start from lower level' as the previous years were slower or not able to achieve the same accelerated level as pre-pandemic
- Personalized mentoring services for freshmen

- General FCPS support system: MTSS (multi-tiered systems of supports)
 - Level 1 (Classroom): instruction differentiation, make-up opportunities, supplemental materials, etc
 - Level 2 (Outside Classroom): meeting and regular check-in with counselors and/or with Mr. Forgash (Systems of Support Advisor). Ex: develop planner, study habits, organization skills, etc. Parents are included/informed starting this level
 - Level 3 (Intensive Intervention): Creating a team of supports, teachers and counselor, screening committee, etc

Q3. *Would you please outline how the administration handles an experienced teacher leaving the school to minimally impact students? Some students and parents have expressed concerns about teacher departures since May, of teachers who have been at TJ for years, and how that might affect students. Would you please elaborate on staffing processes and also what is being done to prevent teacher turnover?*

- TJ has one of the highest teachers' retention rate in the HS level
- It is very rare to have a TJ teacher leaving to teach at another FCPS school
- It is a nationwide problem as teachers are an aging workforce. Average retirement number at TJ and FCPS HSs: 7-8/year
- If advanced notice of departure is given, school works with the teacher to ease the transition (exit plan, such as timing of notification to students and parents, etc)
- Hiring process:
 - Post the position, sometimes on trade magazines for the more technical/stem courses
 - Multi-tier interview process, including have the candidates teach a lesson to a class and then ask the students for feedback
 - Dr. Bonitatibus interviews the final candidate and determines fit
- Invest heavily in teachers' recruiting, training and retaining processes
 - FCPS Program Great Beginnings: mentoring processes for new teachers (to teaching, to FCPS)
 - For example: 9 new teachers in Sci-Tech dept; it is 1 million dollar investment in a year in terms of salary and benefits

Q4. *Many of the questions we received related to Academic Support and its impact on students' Mental Health. Some examples of questions and concerns we hear from parents include excessive workload, excessive student self learning, students not receiving grades until very late, teachers grading differently or assigning differently for the same class. Some parents are concerned about how these types of situations might be unnecessarily increasing students' stress to unhealthy levels. Would you please share the administration's perspective on these types of concerns and what you recommend to students and parents to do to address concerns like these?*

- Self teaching concern:
 - Many teachers use inquiry-based approaches: students need to acquire these new skills; learn how to be independent thinkers and learners. Should be viewed as 'productive struggle'
 - Students might be used to more traditional 1-way instruction style: teacher lecturing, students taking notes
- FCPS requires teachers to have 9 grades in a quarter but mute on what type of grades (HW, Quiz, Lab, Test)
 - TJ asks the teachers to enter the grades weekly (every 7-10 days)
 - Assistant Principals to monitor the gradebooks and follow up to teachers for missing grades
 - Higher rate of absenteeism in teachers due to covid/flu/others (themselves or family members) and a lot of teachers are playing catch up.
 - Missing grades more than 2-3 weeks:
 - Follow up with teachers; then to counselors (if teachers are not responding, please give 24 business hours)
 - If necessary, follow up with the subject-matter Assistant Principal
- Workload concern:
 - Typical FCPS HS is 2 hrs of HW/night but if taking 3-4 AP/post-AP classes, expect more than that (aka managing expectations)
 - Colleges are not honoring AP credits as much, so take unique courses that align with passion
- Grading inconsistency:
 - Using a common assessment test there is careful comparison between teachers.
 - If a team of teachers notices a significant disparity of skill attainment, an individual teacher may adjust grades based on the class average performance on a specific mastery topic
 - Student advocacy, teachers are open to it and more education with students will happen
 - Homework log by subject is useful to present the case: time, length, specific material studied, hw/lab/project/writing completed, etc.

Q5. *Another area we received a lot of questions about related to college application support and preparation for our students – questions like how students are guided in preparation for college applications, preparation for teacher recommendations, and what counselors do to advocate for TJ students to universities – for example, there was a question about what counselors do to advocate for TJ students when it's easier to get a high GPA at base schools and it seems like TJ students are impacted by this in college admissions. Given these types of questions, would you please elaborate at what the counselors and Students Services roles are in college application support and preparation? What do they do and what don't they do?*

- Enjoy TJ; TJ is not just a pass through; Find your interests and passions
- DSS (Dept. of Student Services) are working with students to match the interests with the coursework; mainly by the yearly course selection process.

- Focus on guiding the students on their journey of life
- Colleges have their own metrics to recalculate and reconfigure grades
- UVA is not TJ's 13th grade. They can only take a certain percentage even if all qualify.
- Need to find out how to make yourself stand out
- Few years back, Dr. Bonitatibus visited a few highly selective schools and was told by their admission officers that TJ applicants are amongst the most qualified but at times, they are the least favorite. The TJ applications looked similar to one another: similar GPAs, similar courses taken, similar clubs, students are officers of the clubs they started, started non-profit, etc. They preferred students who can find something unique to separate them from the rest.
- Letter of recommendation
 - Most Junior teachers will ask the students in the spring semester if they are interested in asking them for letters of recommendation.
 - It does not hurt to circle back to them. Ex: Do you need more information from me to write my letter of recommendation?
 - Engage with the teacher so they know you more than just your grades. Eat lunch if they are open to it. Volunteer before or after school. Ask life advice or questions.

Q6. *A lot of what we hear from parents comes from them wanting to help their students be happy and healthy and to be successful in school and in life. Most parents know that it's important for students to advocate for themselves when they are struggling at TJ, but parents are also frequently the first to see that struggle in the home. What advice do you have for parents in terms of the parent's role in supporting their students with good mental health, academic success, and college readiness?*

- Dedicated time to have meaningful open conversations with students
- That conversation should *not* be about academic achievement, grades, internships, etc.
- Example of conversation starter: What did you learn from school? How did you enjoy abc? What was exciting today? Bottom line: Emote with your student
- Encourage your students to keep/create a homework/study log and reflections afterwards (what was the struggle, hiccups, etc)
- Access tutor.com in Schoology
- Engage in extracurricular activities
- Leadership does not need to have a title
- Physical aspects: nutrition, hydration, sleep
- If necessary, parental control: turn off the internet after certain time, etc

Q6. *Another question that was submitted was related to potential senior research lab changes, and this is also something that we've heard parents discussing and worried about. Would you please explain how the senior research labs are changing and will students still need to meet all the prerequisites if they are combining labs?*

- Rephrase 'change' to 'evolve'
- TJ Research Labs/Topics cannot be stuck in the the 20th century (15-20 years ago), one must evolve with the contemporary job market reality
- Many STEM-focused universities are offering interdisciplinary studies, therefore TJ Research Labs should reflect that trend

- The change started last year was to allow easier cross between the existing Research Labs; for example Robotics, Electronics and Prototyping are “stacked” so they are at the same time and students can, at any given time, choose to go to one of the RLs to work on certain parts of their project.
- Working to reduce prerequisites as students are still exploring their interests and passions. One should not need to choose early and/or restricted to have one path. Broader “menu” to allow students to be eligible for 3-4 labs. Possible due to the nature of the interdisciplinary approaches.
- Acknowledged that the school can do a better job explaining this evolution.

There were questions/topics submitted and not addressed during the coffee but Dr. Bonitatibus gave brief written responses to share:

Question about transportation and late bus.

- FCPS and other counties are doing their best with driver shortages and daily conditions. Our on-time arrival for buses has improved considerably in the past few weeks. Please contact the transportation department directly for questions/concerns specific to your child’s depot.

Question about club/activity approval process:

- This process can take several months depending on the circumstance. Some clubs are duplicates of others, some need more information to be submitted, sometimes there are several requests in a queue and there are only so many staff advisors. Students know to work with the activities office to receive updates.